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[“THE WHITE LADY OF ARDMORE.”]

GUY FORRESTER'S SECRET.

CHAPTER VI.

LADY MUNRO felt a weight lifted from her heart when Sir Ira Vernon placed her little daughter in her arms; but though Dollie was her only child she was not a selfish mother, and so soon as she had discovered her little girl was uninjured her thoughts flew to Poppie.

“Where is Miss Smith? Oh! surely, Sir Ira, she was with Dollie?”

“A—a young lady was there,” said Sir Ira, simply; “but she looked a mere child.”

Lady Munro smiled.

“Yes, she always does look about seventeen. But tell me, was she hurt?”

“Forrester stayed with her; he thought she had fainted. You see, her arms were cramped with holding the child, and she had taken off her furs to wrap her in.”

The Countess hurried away to order fires, hot water, and such-like appliances.

Meanwhile, Ira Vernon felt, with a strange pang at his heart, he would gladly have changed places with Guy Forrester, and stayed out in the raw coldness of the November night if by so doing he could have ministered to the comfort of pretty, bright-haired Poppie.

Mr. Forrester was puzzled when the dark eyes closed, and Poppie relapsed into unconsciousness; but he never imagined the revelation of his own identity could have brought on a second swoon.

He bent over the girl, tenderly chafed her ice-cold hands in his, poured a few drops of stimulant from a pocket flask between her clenched teeth and succeeded so well that at last, with a fluttering sigh, the spirit came back to its prison-house.

Poppie half-raised her head and bent her beautiful eyes on his face with a strange dumb pathos.

“You won’t tell anyone?”

Utterly bewildered as to what it was he must keep so secret Guy tried to reassure her by promises that he would do nothing without her consent.

“You will never have that,” said the girl, fiercely; “never while I live!”

Then the fire faded out of her eyes, and to his dismay they filled with tears.

“Everything is very miserable,” said Poppie, decidedly. “Why don’t you leave me here to die? It would be much better.”

“Because I decidedly object to assist in murdering you. Have you forgotten our first meeting, Poppie?”

For a moment her face brightened.

“Where was it?”

“Then you have forgotten! It was in a lonely cemetery not three weeks ago.”

The half smile was a whole one now. Poppie looked like a creature relieved from an awful dread. She gave a sigh of relief.

“I remember all about it now. I’m afraid you thought me very rude and ungrateful?”

“I could not expect you to remember.”

“But I did,” ruefully. “Why, Mr. Forrester, when I told my friend about it she was horrified. She gave up all hopes of me upon the spot. She said I should never make a strong minded woman.”

"Would a strong-minded woman have spent the night in the cemetery, then?"

"No," said Poppie, wickedly; "but having once made use of you to escape from her prison she would have declined your further society. I explained we both wished to go to the railway-station, and there was but one road. I thought that an unanswerable reason."

"And wasn't it?"

"No. She said I might have walked on one side of the way, and you on the other."

"I fancy I should have declined. But I must not keep you here in the damp and cold. I am sure Lady Munro must be very anxious about you."

Poppie replied,—

"I expect she will send me away."

"Send you away!"

"And I shall quite deserve it. You see, Mr. Forrester, she trusted me with the most precious thing she had—Dollie—and I have neglected her."

"Dollie is safe enough, and unless my aunt is a much crueler woman than she looks you are quite mistaken in your fears. But," here his voice softened strangely, "don't go wandering about like a little stray sheep again, for I might not always be here to come to the rescue."

"I think that is just what I am."

"Meaning what?"

"A little stray sheep. You know there is always a black sheep in every family. Well, I am the one in ours."

"Oh, nonsense! Now, I'm not going to let you catch your death by moralising in the cold. You must get up and come home."

"But I can't."

"You must," coaxingly. "I assure you Lady Munro will not be angry with you."

"It is no that; but I can't get up—my feet feel all stiff and cramped."

With the utmost gentleness Guy raised her to a standing posture; but he saw at once she was quite right. She could not move either foot, and the attempt to do so brought on a mass of pain which wrung Guy's very heart.

"You must let me carry you," he said, cheerfully, "then we shall soon be at the Castle."

"Oh, I couldn't!"

"Nonsense! We are close to the entrance to the woods. It is no distance."

"But I am so heavy."

"I don't believe it. Now, give in, like a good child. You can't walk, and I am certainly not going to leave you here all night."

"I should do very well."

"I decline to make the experiment. I do believe you are afraid I shall drop you."

"I am not," indignantly.

"Then you are thinking of your friend—'Stacy' don't you call her?—and how awfully she would disapprove of your accepting my aid; but, you see, she need never know of it, and if she did—as you say she gave up all hopes of you after our meeting in the cemetery—she can't be very much surprised."

He did not wait for a reply. Gathering the small figure in his arms he raised his burden carefully, and set out on his walk.

Poppie's brain was a perfect chaos; but perhaps the two prevalent thoughts were surprise at the strange chance which brought Guy Forrester a second time to her assistance, and a wonder what Stacy would say could her strong-minded eyes possibly be scandalised by the spectacle of Poppie's mode of progress.

"It seems just as though I did it on purpose," she said at last, gravely.

"Did what?"

"Got into scrapes for you to get me out."

"I will acquit you of all such intention, as far as I am concerned; but I do think—and I believe I said so before—you don't take half enough care of yourself. Perhaps when you grow older—"

"Oh, don't!" interrupted Poppie, pathetically. "Please don't talk of my growing old, I can't bear to think of it."

"I didn't mean old. I was only going to say when you were quite grown up—"

"I haven't grown an inch for years."

"Oh, child, what a reasoner you are!"

"And I am not a child!"

"How old are you?"

But Poppie evaded the question.

"I am younger than you."

"I should rather think so! I am within a month of thirty-three."

"So Lady Munro said. She was telling me about you yesterday."

"What did she tell you?"

Poppie felt she had made a mistake

"Only what everyone knows. That you had just come back from Maryland, and she hoped you would settle in England."

"Only that?"

Silence.

"Did she tell you what happened before I went to Maryland?"

"She said you had had a great deal of trouble, and she hoped you would be happier now. She has a plan to make you so," went on Poppy, forgetting the said plan was her own suggestion rather than Lady Munro's.

Guy looked at the fair face so near his own half curiously.

"I understand. She has told you about Mrs. Jenkins?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Of course I was very sorry for you."

"Thank you."

"But I said as Mr. Jenkins was dead—"

"Don't!" said Guy, sharply. "Obdurate my advice, and steer clear of match-making; it is the most cruel pastime any human creature can indulge in."

"Is it?"

"You will find it out some day, when your friends make little plans for you."

"They won't," said Poppie, indignantly.

"Why, I have no intimate friends but Stacy, and she despises all women who marry. She says it's a sign of weakness."

Poppie did not speak again. The pretty head leaned wearily on Guy Forrester's shoulder, and he felt rather than saw the eyes were closed.

He hurried on, reproaching himself for tiring her with conversation.

"It is the strangest thing I ever knew," he muttered to himself. "I have eluded all the dear old chief's plans for my subjection; I have steered safely through all the mazes of colonial society, and I haven't been a week in England before I meet this child. Then she disappears, and as I don't even know her surname I imagine it only a passing episode. When coming to my uncle's—the house he says is to be my home—I find her installed there as one of the family. It must be fate. Well, so long as she never guesses I admire her I don't see why we should not be friends. She herself does not believe in love, so she is not likely to divine my secret."

The reverie lasted till they were at the Castle steps. Lady Munro and the family doctor were in the hall, and under their auspices Poppie was carried upstairs, and the rest of the party sat down to the long neglected dinner, which the sorely-tried cook had been endeavouring to keep presentable for the last two hours.

The Countess returned before they had finished the fish, and said Poppie was in bed. The doctor had given her a composing draught, and promised to call the first thing in the morning.

"I am glad he does not think it serious," said the Earl, warmly. "She is such a pretty child she creeps into one's heart."

"Has she been with you long?" asked Sir Ira, with a great deal more interest than Guy thought necessary.

He listened anxiously for the answer, though he knew already what it would be.

"Barely a fortnight. My lady came to the conclusion Dollie must have a governess, and we advertised in the Times. We chose Miss Smith for a most romantic reason. Her letter

had a deep black border, and my wife would believe anyone who had lost someone near and dear to them must be nice. I must say it has turned out successfully; but we were all relieved when we saw Miss Smith. Her references praised her learning with such profound respect we rather expected to see a tall, spectacled young person, with a contempt for anything beyond the oblogies and sciences taught at Girton."

"Is Miss Smith a Girton girl?"

"She is. I think myself she is a very pretty specimen of a 'sweet girl graduate'; but I own one would never suspect from her manners and conversation she was such a thorough blue stocking."

"How old is she?"

"I never asked her," said the Countess, frankly. "I don't see why an educated lady should be expected to answer such personal questions. I heard she had been at Girton, and had since been six months with Mrs. Disney, who recommended her to me. The Disneys of Olney are a grand old family, and I felt I could trust such an introduction. Mrs. Disney praised Poppie in the highest terms, but said she did not understand the management of boys. As that had no importance for me I engaged her on the spot. I confess," and here my lady smiled, "I do not think she could keep great boys in order, and as Mrs. Disney had sons of ten and twelve in the school room I quite understood her parting with Poppie, and for our sakes I am very glad she did."

Guy felt bewildered. According to his aunt's account his "child" friend must be at least twenty-two, and to his mind she seemed sixteen.

Then he was convinced Poppie was a truth-speaker, and he had certainly understood her that Ardmore was her first situation. He had believed until her father died she had never left home.

Taken altogether he decided Miss Smith was a most puzzling little person.

Lady Munro left the gentlemen over their wine, and went upstairs to the two reserved ones. Her husband turned to the young men almost as soon as she was gone.

"I think it fortunate you should both have returned now; in a few months the general election will be upon us. For years a Vernon or a Forrester has sat for Ardmore. Now, which of you two will contest the seat?"

"Who holds it now?" asked Sir Ira, gravely.

"A nominee of your father's, a certain Clevedon, a very good fellow; but he's growing old, and wants to retire to private life. The Radicals are to bring forward a 'working-man' candidate, and Clevedon would fight him tooth and nail, but he told me himself he would gladly retire if anyone of staunch Conservative views would come forward."

"I am Conservative to the backbone," said Sir Ira, quickly, "and I should like to be in Parliament; but Forrester is a good five years my senior, and has double the experience of life. If he'll stand for the old borough I'll throw whatever interest I may have on to his side with heart and will, and take my chance of a vacancy later on."

Lord Munro looked attentively at his heir for one moment. Guy seemed tempted by the proposal; then he answered firmly,—

"I should like it of all things; but there are reasons which prevent my aspiring to a seat in Parliament."

"What reasons?"

"Private ones, uncle. Be assured I appreciate Vernon's generosity; but we will reverse our rôles. I will do my utmost to ensure his return. Then when I resume my wanderings I need not think of Ardmore as represented by a Radical, and shall feel that, however foolish I have been to my own prospects, I have done no injury to my native place."

Vernon looked perplexed, and yet glad. It was clear he had a great ambition to tack the letters M.P. after his name. All reply was

spared him, for Lord Munro broke in eagerly.

"You don't mean, Guy, you are going to desert me again?"

"I don't know, my lord."

"I can't have it; it is too hard on me. You are as surely my heir as though you were born my son. Why must you scour the face of the earth like Cain, instead of settling down as a Christian?"

"My dear uncle, I don't think I have scorned the face of the earth, since all the years of my absence have been spent on one small group of islands; and I don't feel in the least like Cain, but I doubt very much if it is in me to settle down and lead the quiet domestic life of an English country gentleman."

"Then lead the life of a student. Devote yourself to your writing."

"I will stay in England if I can," said Guy, slowly; "but I am not entirely my own master. It is very probable I may apply for another colonial appointment. A second seven years abroad would do me no harm."

"Don't you know you are injuring your neighbours, Forrester?" put in young Ira, lightly. "My sister was always telling me it was a duty to come home and marry; but it is a far plainer duty for you. If I am regarded as a reprobate for staying away so long, I should think you were held up to general execration."

"Is it money?" asked the Earl, hopelessly.

"You'll excuse my speaking before an old friend like Vernon; but surely, lad, you know my purse is yours?"

"Vernon will think you far better to me than I deserve; but, uncle, I need no pecuniary assistance. Do you remember what they used to call me as a boy?"

"Fortunate Forrester."

"Well, I think the old title has become appropriate once more. From the moment I went to Maryland everything I touched seemed to succeed. I invested a good sum—seven thousand, I fancy—in gold shares, whose value increased tenfold. Then my books took people's fancy; and lastly, just as I was coming home, a man I hardly knew died and left me his residuary legatee. When I came to look into his affairs I found it meant property to over two hundred and fifty thousand."

He carefully mentioned only half Jabez Smith's possessions. The other share he regarded as his only in name, and really held in trust for his troublesome and perplexing ward—Anastasia.

Lord Munro stared.

"My dear boy, do you mean it?"

"I believe so. It took me a long time to realise it. Fordred Brothers, of the Temple, managed my poor friend's affairs, and they assure me the amount is even above the figure I named. There is a quaint, old-fashioned house near London, and furniture and plate."

"I had no idea you had any very wealthy friends, Guy. Who was it?"

"A lawyer I once employed. He knew the history of my engagement to the present Mrs. Jenkins, and—I fancy—pitied me."

"His pity was worth having," said Ira, succinctly. "Why, Forrester, you must be the richest man in the county! It's simply absurd for you to talk of taking a colonial appointment."

"Of course it is," acquiesced the Earl.

"My dear Guy, you must find a nice wife, and settle down near us."

Guy threw up his hands.

"You know Sir Joshua, uncle?"

"Intimately."

"Then you can form some idea of his perseverance and energy."

"The most obstinate man I ever met. I don't believe he ever failed in anything he had at heart."

"Well, for the seven years I lived with him he was good enough to employ all his energy and resolution, strengthened by his wife's sympathy and tact, to find me a partner for life, and he failed. I persuaded him at last to believe the truth that I am not a

marrying man. It would make my stay at Ardmore a far pleasanter one if I could induce you and Lady Munro to adopt this view of my character from the first."

The Earl proposed an adjournment to the drawing-room and summoned Vernon to a match at chess, but Ira soon found their game was only a pretence for securing a *tête-à-tête*, and discussing Guy's singular conduct.

"Do you think he's mad, Ira?" asked the old nobleman, with no little anxiety. "You've known our family all your life, and you'll take my word for it there never was a case of insanity in it; but, upon my word, I begin to think the sun out yonder (which meant Maryland) must have touched the boy's head."

"I shouldn't think so, Lord Munro. You would have heard if Forrester had had a stroke; besides, he really seems to me perfectly sane and collected."

"But with that enormous fortune to talk of going abroad!"

"He's restless, that's all."

"And to refuse to think of marrying!"

"I'm not surprised at that," returned Ira, thoughtfully. "I was only a lad at the time Mrs. Jenkins jilted him, but I have always heard his devotion for her was something wonderful. You see he was five-and-twenty then, and she was his first love. He was hit hard, and I don't suppose he has ever got over it."

"What do you think of the boys?" was Lord Munro's appeal to his wife when their guests had left them.

The Countess herself, comparatively young, must have been amused to hear this term applied to men of seven-and-twenty and thirty-three; but she showed no mirth, but answered simply,—

"I am delighted with Mr. Forrester!"

"Guy! He is your nephew, remember; and Ira, he's a fine fellow, isn't he?"

"I—I don't know."

"My dear child," said her husband, hastily, "you must know. He is the son of my oldest friend, and comes of the finest stock in the west; he's the handsomest young fellow you'd meet in a day's journey, has plenty of brains, and never did a dishonourable action in his life. You must admire him."

"I daresay I shall when I know him better; at present he frightens me."

"Frightens you—how?"

"I keep thinking he is plotting something. Don't be vexed with me, but I don't like his eyes."

"Ira has beautiful blue eyes; they'd be worth a fortune to him if he were a girl."

"I don't like men to have blue eyes."

"Why not?"

"They are generally deceitful."

"Well, Ira isn't deceitful; and I hope you won't let this foolish prejudice influence your manner to him. Ardmore has always been celebrated for its hospitality, and I should not like to think my old friend's son was made to feel himself unwelcome here."

"As if I would be so unkind, especially when he brought me back Dollie!"

But as her husband stalked off to his dressing-room in grim displeasure, it came upon Lady Munro as though with a shock that there must be something beyond passing fancy in her aversion to Sir Ira.

She was a devoted mother, and her natural impulse would have been to take her child's preserver to her heart of hearts; but though Ira Vernon had carried Dollie through the storm—though he had delivered her with all possible gentleness to her mother's arms—the Countess had never "warmed" towards him. She had spoken words of gratitude, but she had not looked into his eyes with thankfulness written in her own, as she had looked into Guy's when he brought home the second wanderer.

She could not make it out. She was not a superstitious woman, nor one given to take sudden likes and dislikes. She had been prepared to take a fancy to Sir Ira since his promised visit had been a source of pleasure to

her husband; she had even thought to herself it would be a pleasant task to invite eligible damsels to the Castle, and help him to choose a mistress for Fairlawn; she had meant to be very cordial and almost affectionate to the young man whose home-coming was so lonely; but somehow his eyes chilled her. She felt an instinctive presentiment that through Sir Ira trouble would come to her or hers.

Guy Forrester, on the contrary, had touched her heart. She had always felt a pang of remorse for all he had suffered through her marriage, and when she noted the half sad shade of gravity which never quite left his manner, a great desire came to her to do something to make up—to try and give him back in a measure what he had lost.

Lady Munro had not been to London that season, but she had friends there able to make all inquiries, and from them she learned that Mrs. Jenkins had taken refuge with her sister at Dulwich in the first flush of her widowhood, and that the said sister had behaved to the poor thing with inconceivable cruelty, and actually turned her out of the house before poor Septimus Jenkins was cold in his grave.

This was surely a little hard on Kate Carlyle, who had borne with Emmeline's whims and lamentations, for three months meeting with nothing but ingratitude and taunts in return; but since Lady Munro's informant had never been to Dulwich, and had only heard of the barrister's wife as a very self-willed, determined woman, so, perhaps, the fashionable news-monger had not meant to be unjust when she wrote that account to Lady Munro, and added the fact that poor Emmeline was residing for the present—"only for the present"—in small lodgings in a quiet part of Belgravia.

"She can't keep up that on a hundred a year!" reflected the Countess. "I think when I have seen a little more of Guy I will write her a little note, and beg her to come to us for Christmas."

This resolution arrived at Lady Munro went to bed; perhaps her slumbers would not have been quite so peaceful could she have witnessed a scene taking place not so very far from her own room.

Guy Forrester was not used to early hours, and after bidding good-night to his hosts had retired to the library, meaning to read himself into a state of sleepiness; but success did not crown his efforts, the book was not interesting, but he remained preternaturally wide awake. At last he threw down the volume in despair, and gave himself up to thoughts of the past which came surging upon him under memory's flood of recollections.

The Castle had been his boyhood's home until he left Oxford and took those rooms in Clarges-street, so mixed up with the crisis of his life. He could remember no other house. His vacations from school and college had always been passed either in travels or with his uncle. He loved every acre of the grounds, every stone of the Castle. His was not a mean nature; he could feel for poor Lady Munro's grief at the loss of her little son; he could understand his uncle's regrets—the sex of his only surviving child cut her off from all chance of inheriting title and estate; but through it all he felt a thrill of gladness that the old place he loved so dearly, the home of his childhood, was not to pass away from him, but must some day call him master.

He would be Earl Munro of Ardmore, it was almost certain. One day—he prayed it might be far, far distant—he must take his place as lord of the Castle; and as he sat in the old library and pondered over his life a fact came home to him, which, patent as it was, had never dawned on him before.

He was the last of his line. He and the child Dorothea were the last representatives of the race of Forrester.

Dollie could perhaps, in default of any male heir, enjoy the estate (of this he was uncertain); but at his own death the title would be extinct.

Extinct! The Forresters of Ardmore, who

had been known and feared even before one of the Plantagenet kings conferred an earldom on the reigning head of the house—the grand old race, who had lived for centuries in honour and repute, would be extinct! The name of Forrester, so famous throughout the West country, would be forgotten!

Sir Joshua and Lady Marton had spent many a half hour in mourning over Guy's willfulness.

The expression of his nephew's intentions (or rather non intentions) was even now like to cost the Earl a sleepless night; but these friends of Guy's would have forgiven him the disappointment he caused them fully and freely could they have guessed the bitter anguish he was suffering now.

"It was a mistake," he muttered, slowly, through his clenched teeth. "He gave me honour, life, prosperity; but they were too dearly bought. I saved my name; but, oh! at what a cost!"

The veins on his forehead stood out like thick purple cords; the beads of perspiration were thick on his forehead.

The library that night witnessed a sad scene; that of a strong man's agony—of a brave man's despair.

"I had better never have come here," muttered Guy, to himself, "better never have seen the old place again; but how could I tell all it would cost me?"

He rose to seek his room, a small silver lamp in his hand. It was late now—something after one. A great stillness had crept over the Castle; a hush of repose had taken the grand old place into its keeping.

His own foot-steps hardly sounded through the thick velvety carpet, and when his ring knocked against the framework of the lamp the slight noise sounded like a loud crash, so intense had been the hush which preceded it.

Lady Munro had allotted Guy his old rooms, and he liked her all the better for giving him the old chamber of his boyhood instead of relegating him to some stately guest apartment, but his quarters were in the west wing, a more distant portion of the Castle, and to reach them from the library it was necessary either to go through the picture-gallery or to traverse a vast corridor running the whole length of the house.

Guy preferred the first alternative. The dead and gone Forresters bore him no grudge. He was rather proud of the long array of brave men and fair women who looked down from their gilt frames, his own portrait being there, painted in the days when he was the Castle's heir.

No doubt Lady Munro's picture now hung beside her lord's.

Again a strange choking feeling came in Guy's throat as he reflected that his likeness would always stand alone. No fair woman's face would ever be pointed out to admiring gazers as that of his wife.

He shook off the sadness by an effort just as he came to the end of the gallery, and then his very heart seemed to stand still.

He hardly dared to breathe. Kneeling on the oaken floor, her face buried in her hands, as though in contemplation of his own picture, was a slender female form.

Guy dared not approach too closely. He saw, as in a dream, the stranger wore soft robes of flying white, and that a thick cloak of a vivid crimson was flung about her shoulders.

Who was she? What did she there? For a moment Guy felt his brain must be turning. He reeled, and caught at one of the stone pillars running down the centre of the gallery for support.

He seemed to be a child again—a little white-frooked child under the care of a Cornish nurse, whose head was well stored with all sorts of fairy tales and romances, and who never wearied of repeating to him the family legend.

Probably from the time he went to school Guy had never heard it, for Lord Munro, an eminently practical man, always frowned

when it was mentioned in his hearing, and the retainers, catching the clue from their lord, affected to think it nonsense, or perhaps an invention of the old nurse's brain.

Guy had believed it firmly as a little child. Of later years the whole matter was banished from his brain. Not till he saw that kneeling figure before his own picture did he recall the legend of the white lady of Ardmore.

It was a very simple one, only that, as in olden times, all the glories and honours of the Forresters had come to them through a certain Lady Blanche, so her spirit would for all time watch over them, and whenever any danger threatened a member of the family a female form dressed in white appeared to him as a warning of his peril.

The old nurse had always declared Guy's father saw a woman in white attempt to stop his horse as he set forth on the expedition from which he was brought home dead. She said that, before his mother died, whenever she was alone a lady in white bent over her; but all this was condemned by Lord Munro as the merest nonsense. Women in white, he declared, were most ordinary objects in summer time, and as to believing they appeared with any supernatural intention, it was the merest absurdity.

And now years and years after, when the old nurse lay dead in her grave, and when well-nigh thirty years separated Guy from her teaching, it all came back to him, fresh and vivid as though he had listened to her tales but yesterday, and he stood contemplating the still, slight, white-robed figure as though he believed implicitly its mission was to him and him alone.

He did not know that he really put faith in the legend—he would have found it difficult to analyze his feelings—only he was certain this was the mysterious presence of which he had heard so much.

He never knew how long he lingered—he could not force his feet to carry him to confront the stranger. He stood motionless while she knelt on, though he caught confusedly the sound of a sweet musical voice half broken by sobs; then he saw her rise and, her face still averted, glide slowly away. He hurried after, but when he reached the broad ante-room on to which the gallery opened, he saw no trace of the stranger. He waited a few moments, but he heard no sign, saw no trace of human presence; then he went slowly to his own room, his mind strangely perplexed, uncertain whether he was the dupe of a fancy or the victim of a mysterious vision. And through all these doubts there ran a tinge of rejoicing; for though their meeting might bring on him a cruel sorrow, Guy Forrester could not but be glad the same roof sheltered him and Poppie.

(To be continued.)

A GOLDEN DESTINY.

—10—

CHAPTER XXVI.—(Continued.)

"Hulloa, Wise, have you brought that brute back?" he said, as he saw the detective. "If I had my way I'd shoot him outright, and prevent any further mischief being done."

"I should like to shoot the real offender, my lord!" the detective replied, with emphasis. "Hanging wouldn't be too good for him, considering that he had murder in his heart."

"What do you mean?" asked the Viscount, and at this moment Villari came out of the house, and joined the group.

"Why, this! Some villain, knowing the two horses, Castor and Pollux, and aware that it was dangerous to ride the latter, painted a star on his forehead, so as to make him look like Castor, and then let Sir Travice ride him, doubtless hoping that something more serious than an accident might occur."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed St. Croix, starting back in undisguised horror. "Is this true?"

"Look for yourself, my lord. Don't go too near lest the vicious beast should kick out at you, but put your fingers to his forehead, and you'll soon see that what I say is correct."

Lord St. Croix did as he was bidden, and when he drew his fingers away, sure enough they were white and sticky.

He drew a sharp breath, and his eyebrows met in a stern line above his angry eyes.

"Wise, if you can lay your hand on the scoundrel, take me to him, and I'll thrash him within an inch of his life. Hanging's too good for such a sneaking, cowardly villain!"

"Right you are, my lord!" responded the detective, heartily; "and I only wish I could put you on his track, but—"

"Stay!" exclaimed Villari, speaking for the first time, "you have very much shocked and surprised me, for as it happened I was the one who saddled the horse this morning, and so I have innocently aided in the villainous plot. Great heavens! to think I have imperilled the life of my friend, my benefactor—"

He half turned away to conceal his emotion, and St. Croix, sincerely sorry for his grief, put his hand kindly on his shoulder.

"Come, come, Villari, it is not your fault, for even if anyone else had saddled the horse the result would have been the same. I have heard Sir Travice declare over and over again that if the two horses were before him he should not be able to distinguish one from the other except by the white star."

"But if I had looked at the other I should have seen the white star, and then I might have guessed something was wrong. I have my own hasty carelessness to blame."

"I don't know so much about that," observed Wise, drily. "I daresay the very clever person who painted the white star on Pollux also painted it off Castor. However, we can soon see if such is the case."

He led the way to the loose box, where Castor was quietly munching, and then they found that his surmise was correct, for not even so much as a white hair was visible on the glossy chestnut.

"You see," he said, with some triumph in his voice, "all the possibilities were evidently considered before the plan was carried out."

"The wretch—the villain!" exclaimed Villari, in a sudden access of indignant wrath. Then he turned to Wise, and said earnestly, "Have you no suspicion as to the culprit?"

The detective looked him full in the face, with a somewhat peculiar earnestness, but the Italian's lustrous eyes never flinched before his gaze.

"I have a suspicion, sir," returned Wise, shortly.

"And the person is—"

"That is my business," answered the detective, turning Pollux into his box, and closing the door; "I will take the key of the stables for the present and keep it. This is an eventful morning, my lord," he added to the Viscount, who looked gloomily meditative.

"You are right," he answered, and then he fell to thinking with a sort of wonder, of the many things that had taken place in the last two months, and came to the conclusion that he did not like Woodleigh Court. It was too full of mysteries, which had been up to the present insoluble.

"I want your advice, my lord," said Wise, ignoring the presence of the secretary. "What shall I do in this matter?"

"Report it to the police at Blackminster," was the prompt rejoinder.

Wise shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think that would help us much," he observed, drily, "nor was it exactly what I meant. Shall I consult Mrs. Seymour or not?"

"Mrs. Seymour is very much worried just now, and is in attendance on Sir Travice," put in the secretary, in his usual gently suave

voice. "Don't you think it would be cruel to disturb her with further anxieties?"

Wise flashed upon him a sharp glance of inquiry.

"Are they in league together?" he wondered to himself; but aloud, he said, "What is your opinion, Lord St. Croix?"

"I am inclined to agree with Mr. Villari. Mrs. Seymour is in great trouble concerning Sir Travice, and will be until the doctor has been and given his verdict, so that I think it would be better to keep this affair from her until after his visit."

"Very well, I will take your advice," the detective returned, and thereupon went into the Court by the back way.

In the passage he was met by a sharp-nosed, angular female, who was a sort of sewing-maid, and whose acquaintance Wise had lately cultivated very assiduously.

"I've got something to say to you, Mr. Wise, if you'll just step inside," she said, with a coquettish smile, as she led the way into a small apartment, littered over with odds and ends of dressmaking. "But how gloomy you look!"

"So I am, my dear; it's because I haven't seen you for such a long time," he responded, briskly; and thereupon—we blush to relate such a thing of the staid, middle-aged detective—he imprinted a kiss on the sewing-maid's not very inviting cheek.

"Lor, Mr. Wise, how can you do such things! You make me ashamed, that you do!" exclaimed the young lady, bashfully; but though she was ashamed she did not try to get away from her admirer—in fact, she edged a little closer!

"You shouldn't wear such a becoming cap, and such a pretty apron if you don't want to be admired," said the detective; "but now let's come to business, for we may be interrupted at any moment."

"No danger. The house is all upside down, because of poor Sir Travice's accident."

"All the more reason why somebody may pop in here to have a talk with you about it. Have you found out where that bit of lace came from?"

It may be mentioned that the lace referred to was the scrap found by the detective hanging on a bush in the plantation.

"Well, I can't say that exactly, but I have found out that Mrs. Seymour has some lace of exactly the same pattern."

"But not torn?"

"No—or at least I couldn't see the tear. Still, it is possible that she may have put the torn part away."

"Not only possible, but probable," the detective muttered to himself, "for she is a clever woman, and would not neglect any chance of concealment. Well, I am much obliged to you, Amelia. Give me another kiss, my dear; and if you *should* happen to put your hands on the identical lace from which this bit was torn, just procure it for me, and I'll see that you are never blamed."

Amelia was not over-pleased at such an abrupt termination to the interview; and the detective, seeing signs of dissatisfaction on her face, gave her an extra kiss by way of consolation.

"I can't stay any longer now, my dear, for I have a good many things to see to, but perhaps on Sunday afternoon we might take a walk together," he observed, as he left the room. Outside he smiled grimly. "I might do worse than marry her, for she would make a first-rate female detective; but I'm afraid she's too vinegary—yes, a great deal too vinegary."

He shook his head as he arrived at this conclusion; but a minute later all thoughts of Amelia and personal matters had vanished from his mind in the anxieties that beset him.

As a matter of fact he was devoted to his profession, and had grown to take a deep interest in this "Woodleigh Court Case," as he called it.

But just now he was in the difficult position

of a man who holds several ends of a tangled skein in his hands, and knows not which one to pursue for fear he may take the wrong one, and thus lose the clue.

He was really anxious to go over to Wyndham Abbey, and hear all there was to be told about the murder; but prudence cautioned him not to leave the Court at this juncture, so he seated himself behind the curtains in a window recess just outside Sir Travice's bedroom, and determined to wait until after the doctor had been.

The Baronet was lying on the bed, only partially undressed, and in a semi-comatose state, while Mrs. Seymour and her daughter stood at the window discussing his case.

There was no one else in the room, and mother and daughter had been silent for some time, watching the quiet figure on the bed, and listening to his stentorian breathing.

"Do you think he will die?" whispered Ermentrude, at last.

Mrs. Seymour shook her head.

"I cannot tell; but such an accident at his time of life cannot be otherwise than serious. I shall be glad when Dr. Wootton comes, and this suspense is at an end."

Again there was silence, and again it was the younger woman who broke it.

"If—if he *should* die I shall inherit his money, shall I not?"

"You will, for the will by which he makes you his heiress is duly signed and sealed. Yes,"—Mrs. Seymour's dark eyes sparkled triumphantly—"whatever happens now we are safe. How different it would have been if this accident had taken place a week or two ago!"

Not a word of pity on the part of either for the man who had been so good to them, whose house had been their home, and whose purse had always opened at their command!

Indeed, both were so wrapped up in their own selfish thoughts, and speculation on what would happen supposing Sir Travice died, that they could not spare a single sigh for the sufferer, and it would have been difficult to say which was the more callous of the two, for the ideas of both mother and daughter tended in the same direction.

"If Sir Travice dies my future is secure—far more secure than if he lives."

Suddenly there came a hasty step outside and a quick knock at the door, followed by the entrance of a tall, genial-looking, white-haired man, who advanced to the bedside, with anxiety clearly written on his features.

It was the doctor.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE horror and surprise at Wyndham Abbey, on news of the murder being brought, may be better imagined than described. The Squire was, indeed, quite unnerved by it, and it was Marjorie who, preserving her presence of mind, had sent for Sir Travice.

As we have seen, he was unable to obey the summons, and Dale, instead of returning with him, brought the news of his accident.

Meanwhile a constable, named Manning, had ridden over from Blackminster, and visited the scene of the crime, where he found the murdered woman lying just as the maid had seen her first; for Dr. Wootton, on assuring himself that she was quite dead, would not have her moved, thinking that, perhaps, the position of the body might help in discovering how the fatal blow had been struck.

Evidently there had been no struggle, for there was only one wound, and the victim's face was as calm as if she had been merely sleeping.

Manning—who, it must be confessed, was rather proud of having such a "big thing" as a murder case entrusted to him, and who saw before him a long vista of honours and consequent advancement on account of the zeal and talent he resolved to display—made a strict examination of the premises, took

possession of a little revolver he found in a cupboard in the sitting-room, and then had the little servant brought before him, and jotted down notes of what she said.

In effect this was little enough, and was really a repetition of what Dale, the keeper, had already repeated to Sir Travice.

She was a bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked, intelligent girl, and although not more than fifteen or sixteen gave her evidence clearly, and with an evident desire to speak the truth.

She told how she had gone out the previous evening, and how her mistress had then seemed a little pale and excited; but otherwise there was nothing unusual in her appearance—how she had come back in the morning, and found the door unlocked; and, finally, how she had discovered her mistress lying dead in the little sitting-room, with the dagger by her side.

"Your name is Elizabeth Webber?" said the constable, making a note of the same in his book.

"Yes, sir."

"And you have been in the deceased lady's service ever since she came to the neighbourhood?"

"Yes, sir."

"She was called Mrs. Fanning?"

"Yes, sir," again.

"Do you know where she lived before she took this house?"

"I do not; but I think, from what she said, she must have been in London for some time."

"What did she say to make you think so?"

"Well, one day she was complaining of the cold, and she said she had no idea of what the English climate was like until she came to London."

"Is that all you can remember?"

"It is all I can remember just now, sir," answered poor Bessie, who was herself considerably shaken and upset by the death of her mistress. "Perhaps by-and-by, when I have recovered myself, I may be able to think of something more."

"All right, then, we'll leave that point. And now about the visitor. You say there was a visitor when you left. Did you see him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know his name?"

"No, I did not let him in either time that he came."

"Then he has been here more than once?"

"I have seen him here twice."

"And it maybe he has come oftener, when you have not seen him?"

"Very likely, sir."

"Can you describe him to me?"

Bessie thought for a moment before replying.

"I think so, sir. He was young and handsome—at least, rather good-looking. He had dark eyes and dark hair, and he was tall, and rather big. I don't think I can describe him any more."

"But you would know him again if you saw him?"

"Oh, yes! directly."

"And he is the only person who has visited your mistress?"

"Well," replied the girl, hesitating, "he is the only one I have seen, but—"

"But what? Now, tell the truth, for all you say is of the utmost importance."

Perhaps this was not exactly the way to put her at her ease; but, as it happened, Bessie had no other desire than to tell the truth, and so she was not so confused as she otherwise might have been, at the sternness of the command.

"I fancy that my mistress had visitors occasionally after I had gone to bed, for one morning, when I came down, I found the end of a cigar in the grate, and two or three nights ago I fancied I heard voices downstairs at about twelve or one o'clock."

"You didn't come down to see if your idea was correct?"

"Oh, no, sir!" Bessie responded, with a

glance of some surprise; "it was no business of mine, and I did not think of such a thing."

"Certainly not—quite right; you are evidently a sensible little person, and will be sure to get on in life," nodded Manning, approvingly. "Now tell me on what terms your mistress and this visitor appeared?"

"On what terms, sir!" she repeated, as if the question puzzled her.

"Yes—yes. Were they friendly or otherwise?"

"Oh, friendly, I should think."

"Affectionate?"

"Do you mean did they kiss one another?"

"Well, yes; if you like to put it in that way."

"I never see them kissing; but then," added Bessie, shrewdly, "they wouldn't do it before me, if they did it at all. Would they, sir?"

Despite his professional anxiety, the constable could hardly refrain from smiling.

"Perhaps not. But from your observation, you would think they were at least friends?"

"Yes, yes," she repeated, half doubtfully, "but—"

"But what?"

"Well, on the night when I told you I heard, or thought I heard voices, it seemed to me as if the voices were quarrelling."

"What night was that?"

"The night before last."

"Did you hear anything that was said?"

"No, not a word, and I should not have heard the voices—for the walls are very thick—if they had not been raised."

The constable was silent for a few minutes, biting the end of his pencil, while he thought over what he had just elicited. Of course his suspicions immediately fastened on the visitor of the preceding day—indeed, he seemed the only person it was possible to suspect of having committed the crime.

The point now was to find out his name, and then proceed to where he lived, and arrest him—unless, indeed, he had made the most of his few hours' start, and gone beyond the reach of immediate arrest.

He addressed a few more questions to the girl, but found she had told absolutely all she knew; and then, having locked the room where the dead body was lying, he got on his horse and rode to the nearest station—which was Wyndhamstowe.

Here he interrogated the porters as to what passengers had got out the preceding day; and as the station was a very small one, and few trains stopped there, it was not difficult to obtain the information he sought.

"The young man I am speaking of would probably arrive by the six thirty-five train," he said, bating his calculations on the fact that Bessie had seen no one with her mistress when she took in her tea at five o'clock.

"By the six thirty-five," repeated one of the porters whom he was addressing; "then I remember seeing him quite well, for he was the only passenger we had by that train. A tall, darkish young feller, with a moustache. Why, I've seen him lots of times, and I ought to know his name, only my memory's so bad. It's the same young feller as was doing something to the Abbey not long ago, and folks did say as him and Miss Marjorie was sweet on one another."

"Really?" exclaimed Manning, pricking up his ears. "You are sure it was the same?"

"Sure and certain, and by token of it, I says to Jim there, 'Jim,' says I, 'that young chap looks as if he had been leading a queer sort of life since he's been in London, for I never see a man so changed in such a short time,' says I. Didn't I, Jim?"

"You did, Bill," returned the person addressed, scratching his head, solemnly. "Them was very words."

"So the young man looked ill, did he?"

"Not so much ill as pale and drawn, and wretched. He was as glum as glum, too; ud

he used to be quite different—had a 'good-day' or a nod for everybody—hadn't he, Jim?"

"He had so, Bill," was the rejoinder.

"And yesterday, when I touched my hat to him, he hadn't so much as a nod for me—in fact, I don't think as he even saw me, and he hurried off from the station as if he was going to catch a train, instead of his having just left one. Isn't that so, Jim?"

"It are, Bill."

"Now," said Manning, congratulating himself on the ease with which these discoveries had been made, "did this young man go back last night?"

"No, he didn't," answered the more loquacious of the two porters. "There was only one up train at eight-fifty, and there wasn't a single soul from here got in that."

"You are certain of this?"

"I'll take my dying davy of it."

"And can't you remember the young man's name? Come, try, and if you do, here's a drink for both of you."

But although they tried hard it was without success.

"The fack is," explained Bill, "we don't take much notice of people's names; but if you go to the Squire, he'll tell you in a minute."

Manning accepted the suggestion, and immediately rode on to the Abbey, where he asked to see the Squire, and was conducted into the library, where the master of the house, his daughter, and Geoffrey Wyndham were sitting—the latter the only composed one of the trio.

"Well, Manning," said the Squire, recognising the constable; "I hope you have come to ask me to grant you a warrant for the author of that ghastly crime."

"You are not far from the mark, sir," respectfully returned Manning, "but my first purpose is to ask you the name of the gentleman who was down here—an architect, I think the porter said he was—a young, tall, dark, rather good-looking man, with a dark moustache?"

"Good heaven's! man, you must mean Roy Fraser!" exclaimed the Squire, interrupting him. "But what has he to do with this affair?"

"Roy Fraser!" repeated the constable, without staying to answer the Squire's question. "Then he must be the owner of this revolver which I found in the murdered woman's house, for the initials are the same, 'R. F.'"

He produced the revolver from his pocket, and handed it to the Squire for examination. Yes, sure enough there were the initials, and as he handed it back great drops of perspiration stood on the Squire's brow.

In the excitement of the moment no one noticed Marjorie, who had risen from her seat, and now stood in the shadow of the curtains, a pale and trembling witness of the scene.

"The initials are the same," the Squire said, in a distressed voice, "but it must be merely a strange coincidence. It is impossible that Roy Fraser can have anything to do with this affair."

"He was acquainted with the murdered woman, and used to visit at her house."

"Yes—that is true."

"Oh!" said Manning. "Then you knew they were friends, sir?"

"I knew they were acquaintances, because I had once seen him leaving the lodge, and talking to the poor creature."

"When was that?"

The Squire paused to consider, and Geoffrey Wyndham, who had hitherto been silent, came to his aid.

"It was three days ago, I believe, that you mentioned the circumstance. This is Friday, then it was on Tuesday."

"Yes," acquiesced the Squire, "I remember now; it was on Tuesday morning."

"He was there again last night; of that we have ample proof," went on Manning, who

thought he saw his way clearer every moment. "And when the servant, Bessie Webber, left the house, he was in it. That, taken in conjunction with the fact of the pistol being found there, and his previous visit, seems to me sufficient evidence on which to ask you to grant a warrant for the young gentleman's arrest."

The words roused Marjorie from the almost stupefied lethargy into which she had been thrown by the production of the pistol, and she started forward—bright, erect, and fearless.

"What!" she cried out, in her clear, ringing tones. "Do you mean that you actually accuse Roy Fraser of this murder? I tell you, then, that the accusation is false—that you never in your life made a greater mistake than to suppose it possible for him to have committed such a crime! He is incapable of it—as incapable as I am myself!"

The constable hesitated, and looked uncomfortable. He was evidently impressed by her earnestness.

"Yes," added the Squire, "my daughter is right. From what I know of Fraser I am convinced that he is innocent—perfectly innocent. He is a man of principle, and unblemished honour."

"Only," put in Geoffrey, with the slightest possible satire in his voice, "we all know that both principle and honour often give way before a sudden, overwhelming temptation, and I don't suppose Mr. Fraser is stronger in that respect than his fellow-men."

Marjorie turned upon him with flashing scorn in her beautiful eyes.

"Your opinion in this instance, sir, must be taken for what it is worth. Your comprehension of a gentleman's character must necessarily be limited."

He flashed crimson up to the brow, and bit his lip till it bled under his moustache.

"I do not know why you should insult me thus," he murmured, reproachfully; and the Squire, who looked thoroughly uncomfortable, added,—

"No, Marjorie—there was certainly no occasion for that remark. You owe Geoffrey an apology."

"I am afraid I shall have to remain in his debt then," said the girl, quietly. "The truth is, I know, often humiliating, but I shall not ask pardon for uttering it."

In the excitement of hearing him accused she had forgotten Roy's behaviour to her, and only remembered her love, and her former belief in the nobility of his character, and the goodness of his heart; and even when the recollection of the mercenary way in which he had behaved came back to her, it did not prevent her from feeling assured that he was utterly incapable of such a crime as that of which he was accused.

The constable had remained an unmoved spectator of this little family squabble, but now he thought it time to interfere, for every moment that passed gave the murderer a better opportunity of escape, and Manning was determined he should not slip through his hands if he could possibly help it.

"Mr. Fraser will have every chance of proving his innocence afterwards," he observed, "but there is a certain amount of evidence against him; and so, Squire, I must ask you to sign the warrant."

"Surely—surely, father, you will do no such thing!" exclaimed Marjorie, putting her hand on her father's shoulder.

"It is certainly very much against my inclination," murmured the Squire, in perplexity.

"Well, sir, you must make up your mind soon," said Manning, with some impatience. "Because I don't want to lose time, and if you refuse to grant the warrant I must go to another county magistrate. It does not seem the right thing to let personal friendship interfere with justice."

The Squire flushed angrily, and his first impulse was to order the man from the room; but second thoughts told him there was a certain amount of truth in the remark, and

before he could say anything Geoffrey again interposed.

"What Manning says is quite right, and your refusal to sign the warrant will not help Fraser in the long run, for if you don't sign it someone else will, and your refusal may be put down to wrong motives. In any case, Fraser will have to give an explanation of his presence at the Lodge, and, in my opinion, the sooner the better."

"Then you advise me to issue the warrant?"

"Yes! And I am sure, when the matter is explained to him, Fraser will acquit you of any unfriendly intention. You are but performing your duty as a magistrate, remember."

Marjorie said nothing, because she felt at this juncture her interference could be productive of no good. Besides, as Geoffrey remarked, Roy would have to explain his visits to the cottage, and the sooner he was given an opportunity for doing so the sooner would this dark suspicion be removed from his name.

Thus pressed, the Squire yielded, and signed a warrant for the apprehension of Roy Fraser on the charge of murdering Elizabeth Fanning!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ERMENTRUDE went out of the room while the doctor examined Sir Travice, and waited in her own boudoir, until her mother should come and give her the medical verdict.

How slowly the time passed, ticked away in seconds by the pretty little cuckoo clock—one of the presents Sir Travice had bought her on their last Swiss tour. She walked up and down the room in a fever of impatience, and if her heart could have been read, no hope would have been found there for the Baronet's recovery.

It is true, that while he lived she would be rich, and surrounded by every luxury, but this was not enough for her wilful and imperious disposition. She wanted to feel herself undisputed mistress of his wealth, and of her own actions; she hated restraint in any shape or form, and although Sir Travice had been as kind to her as if she were his own daughter, she was nevertheless in wholesome dread of his displeasure; and she felt too, that if he discovered her unworthiness, or that she had tricked him in any way, he would cast her off without compunction.

But if this accident proved fatal, what a destiny would be hers! Golden, indeed, and full of life, colour, and happiness!

A few months of mourning, and then a reappearance at Court and in society—not as the prospective heiress of Sir Travice Leigh, but as a beautiful belle, already rich enough to have her own way in everything.

Of course her mother would try to control her, but Ermentrude smiled as she thought of her mother, for she had not the least intention of allowing that lady to play an important part in her future life, although she had plotted and schemed so successfully for her welfare.

No, she would make her mother an allowance, and they would live together so long as Mrs. Seymour made no attempt to thwart her inclinations; but directly she became troublesome—why, then she must go!

In the midst of these filial reflections, the door opened, and the subject of them came in.

"Well?" said Ermentrude, eagerly.

"He will recover."

The girl turned away, and seated herself in the window recess without speaking.

Her mother watched her curiously.

"You had hoped otherwise!" she said, presently, with a faint sneer curving her lips.

She was devotedly attached to her daughter, from the mere fact that she was her daughter; but she was a student of human nature, and she fancied she had gauged

Ermentrude's character to its lowest depths—more than this, she liked to display her knowledge.

"You judge me by yourself," answered the girl, stung by the tone as much as the words.

Mrs. Seymour shrugged her shoulders.

"Well," she observed, calmly; "of course it would have simplified matters very considerably if he had died. And Sir Travice is getting an old man now. For my part, I can't see any particular advantage in living the proverbial threescore years and ten. Somebody says life declines at thirty-five, and certainly after fifty it becomes decidedly uninteresting, and after sixty, a bore. Still, we must bow to fate when we cannot control it."

And with this philosophical remark she left the room and went into the corridor, where she was met by Wise.

Any surprise that she might otherwise have felt at seeing him there was negated by the reflection that the whole house was at sixes and sevens, on account of Sir Travice's accident.

"Ah! Wise," she said graciously, for she made it a point to be invariably polite to her inferiors, and this made it all the stranger that the servants did not any of them like her. "Have you heard the good news given by the doctor?"

"Yes, madam. I took the liberty of stopping him to ask what he thought of Sir Travice's condition."

"And he told you he thought the patient would be convalescent in a week or fortnight?"

"He did—thank Heaven!" said the detective, more warmly than he usually permitted himself to speak. Then he opened his pocket-book and drew from it the bit of lace he had so carefully preserved. "I think this belongs to you, Mrs. Seymour."

She took it in some surprise, and then burst into a laugh. The detective's serious manner seemed so utterly at variance with the tiny torn scrap.

"Yes," she said with perfect freedom, "I think this must be a bit out of one of my lace flounces, but I did not know I had torn it. I suppose the hole was so small that it escaped my notice, and yet, I was looking at the flounce this very morning. Where did you find this morsel?"

"In the plantation."

"In the plantation!" she repeated, and her voice sounded genuinely astonished. "But I have not been in the plantation for weeks!"

"You were not there last night?"

"Certainly not!" very promptly. "I had toothache last night, and went to bed early."

Wise was silent—at a loss in fact. Her manner was so entirely free from embarrassment, so utterly frank and candid, that he came to the conclusion she was really speaking the truth.

In that case it must have been someone else whom he saw last night.

"Perhaps it was Miss Seymour who left the bit on the bush," he said presently.

"Very likely," composedly returned the lady, "for I gave her a flounce exactly similar to mine, and I know she often goes for walks in the plantation. Still," she added, as the idea struck her, "she does not go there in evening dress. It is strange; I will speak to her about it."

But this was exactly what the detective did not wish her to do, and her declaration put him in a dilemma—from which, however, his quick wit soon extricated him.

"I think perhaps it would be better to keep silence, Mrs. Seymour," he said, lowering his voice, "and I will tell you my reason for thinking it. Do you know that your daughter is a somnambulist?"

"What!" exclaimed the lady, starting back in the most unaffected astonishment.

"A somnambulist," repeated the detective, with conviction. "You have heard the servants complain of having seen a ghost?"

"Yes, but what has that to do with the matter?"

"Everything; for what they have mistaken for a ghost is none other than Miss Ermentrude walking in her sleep!"

"Nonsense!"

"It is the fact—at least, to the best of my belief."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because I have seen the young lady when she has been in a state of somnambulism."

"Seen her face?"

"Yes," declared Wise, unblushingly.

"And you have judged from her expression that she must be asleep?"

Again the detective replied in the affirmative, and Mrs. Seymour remained for a few minutes lost in thought. The communication certainly took her by surprise, but she saw no reason to doubt Wise's veracity, for what object could he have in telling a lie?

"When have you seen her?" she asked, after a lengthened pause.

"I saw her last night, and I have also seen her on previous occasions, but I have taken no steps to awaken her, for as you know, it is dangerous."

Mrs. Seymour nodded.

"Why have you not told me this before?" she queried.

"In the first place, it was no business of mine, and in the second, I thought that most probably you were aware of the fact. Last night, however, when I saw Miss Seymour in the plantation, it struck me that you might possibly know nothing about it, and so it was my duty to tell you. I hope you do not think me presuming, madam?"

"On the contrary, I am much obliged to you, and quite agree with you that it is a matter which is best kept to ourselves."

"I am glad. If," said the detective, very respectfully, "I might make so bold as to offer advice, I should say, keep it secret even from the young lady herself until you have yourself seen her in this state."

"But how am I to see her? I cannot keep watch night after night."

"No, but I will do so."

"What, sit up all night long for an indefinite period?"

"There is no necessity for that," answered Wise, with a smile. "From what I have heard and read of cases of somnambulism, I believe there is a certain regularity about them—that the subject usually walks somewhere about the same time, and I have never seen Miss Seymour, or heard of her being seen, later than one o'clock. I will, if you like, undertake to sit up until that time, and when I do see her I will find a way of letting you know, so as to satisfy you. Perhaps she may not do it for days—weeks even."

Mrs. Seymour, puzzled and ill at ease concerning this revelation, assented mechanically, and then returned to the Baronet's room, while Wise slowly descended the stairs, pondering deeply the while.

Matters were coming to a crisis, and he foresaw that the dénouement must be close at hand; it therefore behoved him to prepare to justify the words he had spoken to Sir Travice, or to leave Woodleigh Court with the humiliating consciousness of having failed in his mission.

He met Villari in the hall, and the secretary stopped to speak to him.

"I suppose you've heard that Sir Travice is out of danger," said the detective, pausing too.

"Yes, and I am rejoiced to think that the scoundrel who served him that trick about the horses is baulked of his scheme. By the way," said the Italian, with some anxiety, "I personally am concerned in the discovery of the villain, for as it was I who saddled Pollux I myself am liable to suspicion."

"Yes," returned Wise, very deliberately, and looking him full in the face as he spoke, "I think perhaps you are."

"Still, that I am innocent Sir Travice himself can prove as soon as he is sufficiently recovered, for he will remember that when I brought the horse out of the stable, and saw

How fresh he seemed, I asked to be allowed to saddle another one. Besides, between Sir Travice telling me he wanted the horse, and my bringing it round, so short a time elapsed that it would have been impossible for me to have painted the one mark in and the other out."

"That would have taken no time, supposing you had the materials ready at hand."

"But you cannot surely suspect me?" exclaimed Villari, springing back.

The detective hastened to repair his mistake.

"Certainly not. I was only saying such a thing was possible. In these sort of cases, the first idea that suggests itself to us is to search for the motive, and there would assuredly be no motive for you to let harm befall Sir Travice, seeing that he is, in a sense, your benefactor, from whom your income is derived."

"That is true," observed the Italian, gravely, though he winced a little, as if his pride were hurt by the allusion; "and another factor which you have not brought into the matter is the sincere affection which I entertain for my benefactor."

"Of course—of course."

"Still," went on Villari, "there can be no doubt that treachery has been at work, and the thing is to find out the wretch who did it. Have you any suspicion, Mr. Wise?"

"Perhaps I can hardly say I have a suspicion, sir, but I could make a pretty shrewd guess that the person who fired the pistol at Lord St. Croix, and the person who tried to get Sir Travice's neck broken, are one and the same."

"Really! You surprise me."

Wise shook his head pensively, but refrained from looking at his companion.

"I suppose you are no nearer to finding out who Lord St. Croix's assailant was?"

Again the detective shook his head.

"Well," added Villari, briskly, "to come back to the matter in hand, I should think that your attention ought to be directed to the grooms for they are the only persons who have easy access to the stables. There is a young fellow, named Jenkins, to whom Sir Travice administered a very severe rebuke the other day about some negligence he had found out. It is just possible the man may have taken it to heart, and resolved to avenge it. I do not wish actually to accuse Jenkins, but I mention the matter for your guidance, as a little bit of circumstantial evidence which may or may not be important. If Jenkins is the culprit, there can be no doubt that he painted the horses first thing this morning, before he went to Blackminster for Sir Travice—and, by the way, it was the under-groom's place to go to Blackminster, not Jenkins's. They managed the exchange between them, and viewed by our present knowledge, it looks queer, does it not?"

The detective assented by a nod. He was listening very attentively to all Villari said.

"Of course," pursued the secretary, who seemed to have given a good deal of thought to the matter, "the paint must have been put on with a brush, and probably the paint itself was in a pot or pots. Now, how would it be for you to search Jenkins's and the other groom's bedrooms? It is possible you might find traces that would help you."

"Dear me!" interrupted Wise, with a start. "You are quite right—you ought to have been a detective yourself, Mr. Villari. I will go at once to the grooms' room, and make a thorough search."

As he spoke, he turned away, and went out of the court, through the back door, straight to the stables, above which the grooms' sleeping-apartments were situated. There was a quiet smile on his face the while that seemed to betray inward amusement.

"You are clever in your way, Mr. Villari," he was thinking; "but like other clever people, you occasionally overreach yourself. I fancy you have done so in this instance."

Nevertheless, he made a careful search

through the bedrooms, and with the result of finding two small tins of white and brown paint, and a couple of brushes hidden away in the back of a cupboard filled with all sorts of old lumber.

As the detective came down with these in his possession, he found—as he expected—Villari waiting for him in the yard.

"Well?"

Wise nodded mysteriously, and when they had got inside the house again, said,—

"You were quite right—Jenkins is the culprit. I am going into Blackminster now, to see that he makes no effort to escape, as he is very likely to do; though he has had the courage to make the attempt, it is more than probable his bravery will fail him at the last moment—my experience tells me that this is often the case. I really owe my thanks to you, Mr. Villari, for if you had not suggested it I should certainly never have thought of searching the grooms' room."

CHAPTER XXIX.

As soon as St. Croix heard from the doctor that no dangerous result need be feared from Sir Travice's accident, he rode over to Wyndham Abbey, to offer his assistance to the Squire and Marjorie—or rather to ask if he could be of assistance, for his inexperience in these matters made him afraid that the help in his power would be very small indeed.

Nevertheless, it would be a friendly action, and he was anxious as well to see Marjorie, whom he was inclined to regard as a sort of connecting link between himself and Irene.

As it happened, he was ushered into her presence, for the Squire and Geoffrey were still consulting together in the library.

She was very pale, and her voice, when she spoke, trembled. It was clear, too, that she had been weeping, for her eyelids were red and swollen, and there were traces of recent tears on her cheeks.

"I am afraid you are in trouble," said Harold, sympathetically, as he took her hand. "This terrible tragedy has upset you."

"It is not only that," Marjorie faltered, her nerves too thoroughly unstrung for her to keep up any semblance of self control; "but another trouble has come on the top of it. My father has just signed a warrant for the arrest of the supposed murderer—"

She paused, unable to continue, and St. Croix said quickly,—

"Surely that is a matter for rejoicing? You would not wish for such a villain to be at large?"

"You do not understand me. There is some egregious error in it all, for the man upon whom suspicion has fallen is, I am convinced, perfectly innocent. Indeed, he was a friend of my own—Roy Fraser."

"Roy Fraser!" repeated St. Croix, in astonishment. "You don't mean Roy Fraser, the architect?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"We were at Eton together, and though of late years we have rather lost sight of each other, we still continue friends."

"I did not know he ever was at Eton," said Marjorie, slowly, and without raising her eyes as she spoke.

"Yes, and at Oxford as well. Perhaps you don't know his history? It is rather a pathetic one. His father was a man of very good family, who married beneath him, and died about twelve months later—just after Roy was born. The widow was left in very poor circumstances, and her husband's father offered to take the boy, and bring him up as his heir if the mother would promise never to approach him. It was a hard, brutal condition, and first of all the poor woman refused it; then, being destitute and friendless, she seems to have thought she would not be acting rightly by her son if she deprived him of such a chance of wealth, and so she acceded to old Fraser's wish, and Roy was sent to him,

and brought up as his heir. It was not until the lad was twenty-one that he learned the truth, and directly he knew his mother was alive he sought her out, although his grandfather threatened him with disinheritance. He paid no attention to the threat, but the old man has carried it out; for from that time to this they have never seen each other, and Roy had himself articulated to an architect, and has since earned his own living and his mother's as well."

Marjorie was silent, but her heart swelled with a sort of pride at this evidence of Roy's nobility of character. It was strange that she should, as it were, entirely overlook his own brutal behaviour to herself, in the distress she felt at his present painful position.

She was rather surprised that he should never have told her his earlier history in the days of their courtship; but when she came to consider, she found that, in reality, their courtship had consisted of two interviews, in the duration of which they had been too much engaged in talking of the future to spare a thought for the past!

"Of course," went on St. Croix, presently. "it is sheer nonsense to accuse Roy Fraser of such a crime. What is the evidence against him?"

And then Marjorie, as clearly as she could, told him of Fraser's visits to the cottage, of his having been seen there the night of the murder, and finally of the finding of the revolver with his initials upon it.

Harold's face grew graver during the recital.

"The evidence is purely circumstantial, and no doubt Fraser will be able to explain it away," he observed; "but I am bound to confess that there are sufficient grounds to justify his arrest."

"But you do not believe him guilty?"

"No, certainly not. I will contrive to obtain an interview with him to-morrow, and talk the matter over. No doubt he will be able to give a perfectly satisfactory explanation of his acquaintance with this poor woman."

"Then you will befriend him?" said Marjorie, with unconcealed anxiety, that gave St. Croix an inkling of her secret.

"On that you may depend," he returned, heartily; "and now, I think, I had better be going. I suppose it will do no good for me to see your father?"

"On the contrary," responded Marjorie, with more truth than politeness, "I think matters had better rest as they are for the present."

Thereupon he took leave, marvelling at this strange chapter of accidents which had led to his hearing of his old schoolfellow once more.

His brow continued very grave as he thought over the circumstances surrounding the murder; and if he felt convinced that Roy was not the actual criminal, on the other hand he imagined it very probable that there had been some love affair between the young man and the beautiful foreigner, and supposing this to be the case, Fraser would be still more open to suspicion than he was at present.

Altogether, the case looked cloudy, and St. Croix, who was a man of the world, and pretty clear-sighted, shook his head rather mournfully, as he recalled poor Marjorie's sad face and tear-stained cheeks.

Not a word had been spoken of Irene—not because she had been absent from the Viscount's mind, but because he felt it would be unfair to intrude other troubles on the young girl at this particular moment, when she had so many of her own.

"A letter for you, if you please, my lord," his valet said, when he entered his dressing-room, and at the same moment presented an envelope on a silver salver.

St. Croix took it, and glanced at it carelessly before opening it. It was forwarded on from his club, and the enclosure made him smile with some surprise.

The address was written in a round, un-

formed hand, which might have belonged to a child just emerging from pothooks and hangers.

The envelope was dirty, and of the commonest possible description, while a dab of red sealing wax—sealed with a thumb—ornamented the flap, and also the four corners of the back.

Evidently great pains had been taken to render the contents secure from observation, and doubtless the writer had regarded those five great red blotches with sincere admiration, as lending an element of artistic beauty to what would otherwise have been a commonplace epistle.

Rather bewildered, St. Croix took out half a sheet of soiled note paper, on which were traced the following lines,—

"This is to tel u that miss irene duval as bin taken away from here agen her will, and i believe no good is intended her. She left last nite in a ship called the *anna-maria*, but before she went they giv' her somethin' as sent her to sleep, and it was wile she slep' that they took her away. i can't sign my name becous i shall ketch it if they find out i hav' wrote this, but if u are a fren of hern, u will be abel to do somthink for her, tel her as i wrote to u, but she is not to tel nobody else."

This effusion—which it is needless to say was from Euphemia—was neither signed nor dated, and St. Croix had to read it over a second time before its meaning broke fully upon him.

No doubt of its genuineness struck him, for in the badly-written, badly-spelt lines, he recognised a certain sincerity and friendliness to Irene, but, alas! the information it gave him was almost too scanty to be acted upon.

"Still it told him that Irene was in danger, and the postmark on the envelope was 'London, E.' The East of London is a large district—much too large to give any hopes of his being to trace the writer. And, indeed, to try and trace her would be merest folly, for while he was thus occupied the young girl would be borne far beyond the reach of rescue.

He sat down, and leaned his head on his hand, trying to regain his scattered wits, while he realized the position. That he was, in a measure, bound to do his best to aid the young girl seemed clear, and his engagement to Ermentrude need not be permitted to interfere with such a course, for—he told himself—he looked upon Irene as a sister. Perhaps in this he deceived himself, and if he had said he *tried* to look upon her as a sister he would have been nearer the mark.

Then the next point to be considered was in what way he could help her. The letter in his hand was written yesterday, and according to it Irene had been taken aboard the night before, so that she must now be well on her way to her destination, and in that case interference would be quite useless.

And yet to sit still and let her drift quietly away to whatever fate her enemies had determined on seemed cruel and heartless. At least he would make an effort on her behalf.

The *Anna-Maria* had evidently started from the London Docks—or such was to be inferred from the expression made use of in the letter—"she left last nite in a ship called the *Anna-Maria*—it was wile she slep' that they tuk her away."

His only plan therefore, was to go to the London Docks, make inquiries concerning the *Anna-Maria*, and in that way learn her destination, and when she started.

Looking at his watch he found that if he made haste he might catch the midday express to town, and then he went quickly in search of Ermentrude—for their present relations made it imperative for him to acquaint her with his movements—and to wish her good-bye.

(To be continued.)

THE PRETTIEST WEDDING OF ALL.

—o—

Oh, weddings were plenty
In the season just ended;
I'm certain that twenty
Or more I attended;
And the brides were as lovely
As brides always are,
And each seemed "a bright and
Particular star;"

But Fred says of one that we love to recall,
"It was really the prettiest wedding of all."

There was no profusion
Of jewels or lace,
Nor yards of illusion
Her figure to grace;
But the bride was most simply
And tastefully drest
In the style and the colour
That suited her best;

And Fred, in a whisper—he stood at my side—
Said, "I never beheld a more beautiful bride."

I hardly need mention
The fact, I presume,
But all my attention
Was fixed on the groom,
Whose face so reflected
The joy of his heart,
That in the sweet service
My own took a part.

And, oh, 'twas a scene we remember with pride,
For Fred was the bridegroom, and I was the bride.

J. P.

OH! GIVE HIM BACK TO ME!

—o—

CHAPTER XXXVII.

LADY JANE'S DESPAIR.

JACK SARTORIS had drowned himself! The news spread fast as the plague. It was the universal topic in the clubs. Nobody had seen much of him lately, but it was astonishing to find how many intimate friends had to mourn his loss.

"Never did a mean thing in his life," said one.

"Never refused to help a fellow out of a hole," sighed another.

"A thorough good fellow down to the ground," maintained a third.

"It was that giddy young wife of his who broke his heart," growled a sour old bachelor, who had once been snubbed by Violet because his attentions had become too marked.

It seemed so weirdly grotesque to unite the dismal idea of suicide with the bodily form of cheery Jack Sartoris.

"I always said he would shoot himself by accident," said Ned Clinton, staring out of one of the large windows in the Carlton, with his hand in his pockets, "or tumble down a precipice, or be stabbed in the back by a rascally guide for the sake of his 'express' and his watch-chain, but this quite bowls me over. I'd have betted any amount against it. I'd have staked my head with confidence."

"Yes, because no one would have bothered you to pay up," remarked a friend, with a dry smile.

"Don't chaff—I'm upset. We spent such a famous time together in the Andes! He was the pleasantest companion possible. Jove! there goes Armitage with a pile of luggage. I wonder what mischief he is up to? There's something wrong."

"Wrong!" exclaimed his friend, with a chuckle. "I don't think he will be wrong after this. Why he's dead on Sartoris's wife,

and now that she's free, he may chance to get her."

"Not he! When a woman marries she wants something more cheerful than a death's head opposite to her at table; and Armitage looks always as down in the mouth as if he was sitting at a funeral feast, and had been cheated out of his legacy. I'm off to leave a card in Brook-street."

With a nod to his friend he sauntered off, whilst the former looked round at another ally, and said, in a low voice,—

"Shouldn't wonder if this news landed a certain cousin of his in a lunatic asylum."

"What, Lady Jane?"

"Hush! someone will hear you. Armitage had better have taken her away somewhere, for she's sure to make a fool of herself—swathe herself in crepe from head to foot, and sob through every sermon."

"Was it a case?"

"Of spoons on her side—the woman always goes too far in these platonic friendships. Hope we shan't hear of something too dramatic in Eaton-square. I shall send my sister to call there this afternoon."

"Let me know if anything's up," said the other eagerly, for men are just as inquisitive about their neighbours' feeling as women, although they would deny it indignantly.

Poor Lady Jane! The horror of desolation had fallen upon her—just when her hopes had been raised by a message from a friend in Austria. Lottie Verner had declared that she had seen Mr. Sartoris in the Imperial Theatre in Vienna, and sent her brother to call at his hotel the week after, when he was told that the English milor, whose name they changed into something quite different, had already started for England.

Lottie was famed for the mistakes she made, but Lady Jane had buoyed herself up with the hope that in this one instance her erratic eyes had really seen the man she thought they saw.

Day after day she had expected him to walk in. As she sat in the Haymarket Theatre that night she half hoped to find a letter from him lying on the hall-table when she got home. She would not go out during the following day, for fear lest she should miss him.

And now she could go out or stay in—it would make no difference. Never again would she hear his well-known knock, or his firm light step on the stair! Jack Sartoris was dead, and with him had gone all the poetry of a perilous friendship.

He was gone, and all the fruit of her lies, and treacheries, and evasions, had passed away as completely as the pretence paper-money which the Chinese burn for the benefit of their friends in the spirit-world.

She sat hour after hour in the same position, with a book on her knees to deceive anyone who happened to come into the room, whilst her thoughts travelled dismally over the past years.

She knew that the love which had been so innocent in its birth-spring had grown into sin as soon as Jack Sartoris had become the husband of Violet Mayne; but after all, he had been "so little married," as the French would say, that it had seemed to make but little difference, and the thought that she could be of some comfort to him still was dangerously sweet.

Was it years ago, or only a few months, that she stood in that room, and burnt a letter? It was but a little thing—a piece of paper crackling in the flames of a few matches—and yet it had separated husband and wife! It had turned her—Lady Jane Armitage—into a reckless, desperate woman.

It had seared her conscience, but brought no penitence in its wake. And a crime which is not repented of doubles and trebles its sin as the years go by.

There was a step outside, a hand laid on the handle of the door; and as the door opened she looked up with a heavy abstracted gaze, and saw her brother.

"Ralph! what is it?" she exclaimed, involuntarily, directly she caught sight of his ashen face. A terrible foreboding shot across her mind. There was something else—something perhaps more terrible than Jack's death.

"What do you mean?" he said, sullenly. "I came to tell you that I'm off. I feel restless—I've stayed rusting here too long."

"Where are you going?"

"To Paris first—perhaps to the Riviera. I don't want to be bothered with letters, so I shall leave no address."

"Then I'm not to write to you?" scarcely knowing if she were glad or sorry.

"No, it won't be a great deprivation," with a slight sneer. He went up to the fireplace, arranged a coal more to his satisfaction with the toe of his boot, leant his arm against the mantelpiece, and looked down into the fire with sombre eyes.

His presence fidgeted Lady Jane. She wanted no sneering glances thrown at her in her sorrow; but as she looked at him she thought of Bertie Mayne, and the brotherhood of craft and sin in which he had linked those two together. Oh! if he could see into the depths of their hearts would he be content now—now that the due reward had come to the one, but not to the other? Ralph scarcely looked like a successful lover, though the woman he loved was free, and he might take his chance with the rest. His eyes were sunken, with dark circles round them, as of a man's who has watched the night through in wild unrest; his cheeks had fallen in, as if after a wasting illness, and all the youth and the hope and happiness of life in its prime had gone from his expression. Had a blight fallen on them both?

She got up from her seat with a strange yearning in her empty heart, and laid her hand affectionately on his arm. Alas! he shook it off as if it had been a reptile, and shrank from her look of sisterly love.

"Don't—don't, Jane," he said, in a voice of pain, and held up his hand as if to hide his face, "don't ask me to stay. I should go mad if I stayed here. Months and months must all go by before I speak, and waiting is a thing I could never stand. Let me go—don't say a word to stop me, or you will be sorry."

"Oh Ralph! for Heaven's sake, if you have anything weighing on your mind, tell me!" she cried, imploringly, as she clung to his arm, completely carried away by the vague terror with which she was possessed.

"Don't be a fool!" he said, roughly. "Just because I'm out of sorts and going away for a change, you talk as if I were a convict escaping."

"Take me with you—I want a change. Oh! so desperately—you can't tell! I would give anything on earth to go," she cried, passionately.

"No—no, it would never do. My friends wouldn't be the sort for a woman; you would tie me abominably. Stay here, and get the right side of Violet and the old lady. Comfort the poor girl!" he said, hoarsely, and turned his face away.

"You only care for her. I might die or go mad—it doesn't matter to you a bit," and down went Lady Jane's face on the edge of the mantelpiece, whilst her shoulders shook with convulsive sobs.

Ralph stared, for such an exhibition of feeling on the part of his sister he had never witnessed before. His heart was full of pity for her, and yet he dared not show it, knowing that she would shrink from him as from a leper and an outcast, if she once suspected his crime. He stood by her side, pulling his moustaches, outwardly cold, unfeeling, and impassive, inwardly conscious-stricken and stirred to the heart's depths.

"Don't cry, old girl!" he said, not unkindly; "nothing was ever made better by giving way. Marry your friend Croesus, and you will find there is much consolation in receipted bills, and plenty of funds to draw upon."

"As if I cared a straw for money," she cried,

lifting her tear-stained face in a burst of indignation.

"Oh! you don't—don't you? You would be sure to set up a howl if you hadn't got any. Well, good-bye!" holding out his hand.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?" in surprise.

His sallow cheek flushed as he stooped his head, and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

"Cheer up! and give my love to mother."

"Won't you see her? She's sure to be in."

"No; I shall be too late. Lots of things to do," he said, hurriedly, and walked quickly across the room.

At the door he turned.

"Don't forget to go to Brook-street," he said, then gave a little nod, and closed the door behind him.

Lady Jane stood where he had left her, and with a slight moan hid her face in her hands. How she envied Violet her widow's weeds!

Mrs. Sartoris could put on yards of crêpe, although she had not seen her husband for years, and shut herself up as much as she liked; whilst if Lady Jane Armitage put on a black dress, and declined so much as one dinner-party, all the gossips in town would prick up their ears immediately. And yet she had been his chosen friend and confidant, and, as Bertie Mayne said, had seen him more often than his wife.

There was nobody on earth to pity her, and she felt as desolate as if she had been shipwrecked on a lonely island out of the track of passing ships on the broad breast of the Atlantic.

Her mother was too much engaged in social duties to find much time to spend with a daughter who objected to paying morning calls; her father was thoroughly engrossed in politics; and her brother, who was her only hope in her home-life, had just left her, curtly refusing to take her with him. Was life worth the trouble of living?

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CYRIL BRINGS BACK THE PORTMANTEAU.

It seemed as if the knocker at No. 10, Brook-street would soon come off its hinges, for it is no exaggeration to say that it was never at rest.

From the first thing in the morning till long after dusk there was a constant tap-tap at the door, followed by a subdued murmur between Winter and somebody on the doorstep.

The old china bowl, which was the receptacle for cards, had to be emptied twice a day, and the butler had to leave all his other duties to the footmen, as he chose to answer all inquiries in his own impressive way with the decorous amount of gravity that was suitable to the occasion.

It is better not to dwell on the pitiable state of the young wife when she found that her last chance of reconciliation was taken from her.

Day after day she had pictured the moment when he would come back to her, and she would go to him with a frank confession of the absurd pride which had kept her from explaining the real reason for the presence of Cyril's photograph, when half-a-dozen words would have averted the misery of years.

And then she fancied how he would accuse himself of cruel harshness, and take her to his arms, never—oh! never to be parted again, and all her future life would be one dream of happiness!

Now the light and the joy were on one side of a black door, and she on the other, in the cold grey twilight of disappointment.

"Oh! if I had but seen him once!" she cried again and again, till Lady Stapleton wondered if it would be better to tell her that she had seen him, and spoken to him, and even loved him, under the name of St. John.

But who could tell what the effect would be? It would be maddening to her to think

he had been with her, ready to forgive and forget, and that she had sent him away in a storm of passion.

She would feel so certain that all would have gone right if she had only known that he was Jack, and his jealousy of Cyril Landon would have been laughed to scorn.

Lady Stapleton came to the conclusion that as she had not spoken before it was better to hold her tongue; but she was sorely tempted to break her resolution about twenty times a day.

Bertie Mayne had been dispatched at a few hours' notice to a diplomatic post, so Cyril Landon started for Anvergne to investigate the spot where Jack Sartoris was said to have met his death. A clerk from Mr. Winterton's office went with him to take down the affidavits of Monsieur and Madame Simon. It was not the landlord in person who called in Brook-street on the night of the ball, but a friend, whom he had asked to carry the news to Lady Stapleton. This friend was only passing through London, and had so little time to spare that he could not wait for a more reasonable hour.

Madame Simon described graphically how Monsieur Sartoris had started for the mountains when the brief daylight was already diminishing—how she had warned him not to go, and felt a dread presentiment in her heart; and how, as the hours passed away, and brought no sign of him, her husband, accompanied by three or four young fellows from the village, went up Mount Pilate with torches in their hands, and searched and searched, shouting themselves hoarse, and waking all the unearthly echoes with their cries.

They came back cold and exhausted, and her husband had to keep his bed the next day; but as soon as it was light her little Pierre went out on his own account, and returned in time for breakfast with the gentleman's cap in his hand.

Cyril and the clerk were taken up the mountain and shown the exact spot where the cap was found, caught in a twig just at the edge of the Devil's Saucepan.

The ice had evidently been broken there, Monsieur Simon said, because for a few yards it was so much thinner than all the rest of the surface.

"Is it not possible to drag the water?" asked Cyril, thinking it would be some consolation to the young widow at least to have her husband decently buried in English ground, where she could show her loving remembrance by placing flowers on his grave.

"Perfectly impossible, Monsieur," exclaimed the Frenchman, uplifting his palms; "there is no bottom to it. How could you find a line that would reach from this place to the very foundations of the earth?"

"Still we might at least let down grappling irons, and do our best."

Monsieur Simon shrugged his shoulders; but Cyril insisted, though even Mr. Godson, the solicitor's clerk, thought the attempt unnecessary.

The grappling irons were sent for, and fixed on the longest ropes that could be procured. Then the ice was broken and the irons let down till the rope ran out to the end. It was pulled up with no result, except that a heap of weeds were presently strewn on the bank.

Soon it became evident that further trouble was useless, and that poor Jack Sartoris had disappeared for ever. Cyril picked a withered leaf from a creeper, took a long look at the iron-grey cliffs, rising like a prison wall on every side, and his heart, heavy with the thought of the suicide, went slowly down the ice-bound path, following Monsieur Simon's portly form.

It seemed to him incredible that Sartoris should have troubled himself to come all this long way, in the depth of winter, to kill himself in the frozen solitude. If he wanted to die there were hundreds of ways in which he could have managed it more comfortably. An overdose of chloral, and he might have gone to sleep in his bed in the best hotel in Paris,

and woke up in Eternity, and nobody would have known whether the overdose were an accident or not.

That secrecy was not his object was evident from the fact that he had thrown out several hints as to the worthlessness of life to the landlady, and given her an address in England to which she could apply if he happened to die. All this sounded so utterly unlike the man he remembered that he was almost inclined to discredit it; but Madame Simon gave the same account every time, and could not be caught tripping.

An independent witness also appeared, who saw the Englishman go up the mountain just as the dusk was falling. He afterwards looked in for a drop of eau-de-vie, and found both landlord and landlady growing anxious about their guest. He was a volunteer in the search party, and testified to the dismay of the Simons at the Englishman's disappearance.

The Simons bore an excellent character in the neighbourhood, and no one would believe a word against them. The priest, an elderly man, with a fat, kindly face, had exchanged a few remarks with the Englishman, and had been struck by the gloom of his expression. In fact, he had walked down to the Lion d'or to warn Madame Simon to be careful, as he did not like the strange look in the stranger's eyes. He had no doubt that the unfortunate man had committed suicide. If he were not at the bottom of the "Devil's Saucepan" he must be somewhere else.

The out of his figure in his long ulster was well-known, and though the most careful inquiries had been instituted in the neighbourhood, no man answering to his appearance had been seen at either the railway-stations or anywhere about. Therefore, the Englishman could not have changed his mind, and gone elsewhere.

The chief of the police had communicated with Scotland-yard, but there was nobody "wanted" of the name of Sartoris; or, supposing the name were fictitious, of his exact personal description. He was too tall for an absconding forger of the name of Smith, and too thin for a fraudulent bank-director who bore the patronymic of Marmabuke Montmorency.

The priest said, after one look at his face, he knew him to be at war with Heaven, as well as with himself; and it was despair that most often drove men to suicide. He thought from the first that it would be the Englishman's probable end.

Again Cyril raised his eyebrows in surprise. Was it possible that Father Antoine was talking of Jack Sartoris, the eager sportsman, the eminently cheerful companion, the man of whom his friends in the Carlton spoke "as a rattling good fellow all round?"

The change must have been very sudden, for Lady Jane had spoken of him as exactly like his cheery old self, except as to personal appearance. And yet the parting with his bride had been so very long ago, and he must have got used to that grief—supposing it were a grief.

Cyril's anger had been hot against Jack Sartoris for six or seven years; but now his wrath was changed into pity as he looked down upon the shabby little portmanteau which had been over so many parts of the globe in its owner's wanderings. There were all sorts of queer, outlandish names on the half-obliterated labels, but there were none of recent date to show where Sartoris had last come from. That one label which might have given some clue to his movements just before he reached the little inn in Auvergne, was missing. It had either never been affixed, or else torn off. Cyril was inclined to think the latter, from some vestiges of torn paper on the leather; but, if so, why was it done? Why was Sartoris anxious that no one should know where he came from?

Perhaps, after all, he was no better than other men, and had got into some disreputable scrape, from which there was no possible outlet, except through dishonour or the grave.

If so, let the dead rest in peace. It should not be his task to throw mud on the fame of Violet's husband. She should still think him the angel that she so perversely and unaccountably imagined him to be; and there should not be a whisper of disgrace to add a further bitterness to her tears.

Very sadly and reverently he gathered together all the Englishman's possessions, which Monsieur Simon had caused to be locked up in the bedroom which he had slept in. These only consisted of some fine cambric shirts, a few socks and handkerchiefs, some other articles of wearing apparel, a small packet of visiting cards, a hair-brush with an ivory back, marked with the Bartoris crest, and a tooth-brush. There were no other ostentatious—not even a single scrap of paper with a memorandum on it. It seemed as if a man who travelled about from place to place, must have acquired some odds-and-ends, but if Bartoris had done so, he had left them all in some other place.

One thing proved that he could only have provided himself with what he would consider absolute necessities for a day or two; for there was no razor, and not a single item of a man's usual shaving apparatus; and this, when he was travelling in the civilized land of France!

There were a few napoleons lying on the dressing-table, otherwise the absence of all money might have excited suspicion. These were carefully sealed up in a paper by Mr. Godson, who went back to Lincoln's-inn with a neatly-written report of the whole proceedings, whilst Cyril followed more slowly with the shabby portmanteau on which, although he never guessed it, a man's life depended!

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A FATAL OATH.

CYRIL LONDON had come back and told his tale to sorrowful ears. A flood of tears gushed from Violet's eyes as they fell upon what had been her husband's portmanteau. It was shabby now, dull and dim as her own life had become, but she remembered it bright, and smart and shiny, forming a part of what she had laughingly called her bridegroom's "trousseau."

The mere sight of it carried her back with one bound to her wedding-day, and she saw herself a happy girl, trembling with hope and fear under the weight of her crown of joy. That girl was worn out now, like the portmanteau, and it was time to go to bed, and sleep the sleep that knows no waking!

The season for pretence was over, she need no longer sit up and smile for the benefit of the gaping crowd. No one throws a stone at a widow because she retires into seclusion, and hides herself from the fidgeting gaze of her acquaintances. Oh! for a quiet corner in which simply to lie down and rest! But rest was the last thing that anyone wished to give her. Everyone was afraid of leaving her alone.

"Don't let her brood," said Lady Mayne, writing in great anxiety from Vienna. "I know she will fancy that she is broken-hearted, and that may have a most terrible effect on her brain. If you think I should be of any use I would come over at once, but Gertrude will be able to take my place, and my darling Violet will know that my thoughts are always with her night and day. Between you and me, in strict confidence, I can't look upon Mr. Sartoris's death as a misfortune, although I wish the poor man had died quietly in his bed. Violet is now free from an oppressive tie—but you will think me heartless, so I will say no more.—With fondest love to my dear child, and much to yourself, ever your affectionate sister,
"ISABELLA MAYNE."

"P.S.—Let me know by return of post if Violet would like to have me with her, and I will start as soon as possible."

Lady Stapleton gave the message, but Violet shook her head. Her mother could do her no good. There was no sympathy between them on the subject of Jack. She was aware that all her own family hated his name, and therefore she clung all the more to her aunt, who always spoke of him kindly, and who had cried real tears of sorrow over his death.

Together they retired in the spring to the Priory, and Mrs. Milton sobbed over the young widow, and the destruction of all her fond hopes. How she had looked forward to the day when "Master Jack" and his lovely wife should come and live together, happy as two love-birds in the same nest!

She had lived on that hope all through the dreary winter, when the wind was howling round the old chimneys, and making the branches of the large elms creak as if they were coming off—when the river, where her young mistress was so nearly drowned, was one sheet of ice, and the snow lay white and cold over the flower-beds—when she was almost tired of longing for the joy that never came!

Poor, faithful old soul! She did more good to Violet than anyone else, for the young widow felt that she could open her heart to the woman who had loved Jack ever since he was a mischievous, kind, dangerous, loving schoolboy.

Often she came into the drawing-room, when Lady Stapleton was busy in some other room writing letters, and dilated for an hour or more on the scrapes that Master Jack had got into. Violet loved to listen, as she thirsted to know all the details of his life before he ever crossed her path.

Cyril brought his wife to stay at the Rectory, and was often at the Priory. Every time he came it made him sad to watch the wreck of a girl's life. It seemed strange to him that her heart should be bound up with the fate of a man who had discarded her, and behaved shamefully to her, as everybody allowed.

But woman's love is like that of the angels, and does not depend on the worth of the object. Hasn't this been proved more than a thousand times?

Mabel caught a cold, and was carried back to Somersetshire much against her will; but where her health was concerned her husband was inexorable.

She wished so much to stay a little longer with her beloved parents, and to comfort her best friend in her great affliction; but her hacking cough made everyone anxious, and Violet, though she was very loth to part with her, confessed that Cyril was right.

They gave her a pressing invitation to Landon Lodge, of which she promised to avail herself "some day," which in general parlance is almost tantamount to a refusal.

Just about the same time Lady Stapleton was obliged to run up to London for a few days on business.

Violet begged her not to forget to bring back with her the small portmanteau which Cyril had fetched from Auvergne, and which had been left behind in Brook-street through the carelessness of the servants when the move was made to the Priory.

Violet had been secretly longing for it; but did not like to have it sent down by train. Mrs. Milton had sighed over its absence many a time.

It would be a melancholy pleasure, she thought, to lay its contents in the drawers of the room which had once been his—to season them with her tears, and nest little bags of lavender, sewn up by careful fingers, just as if he were coming back.

Lady Stapleton promised not to forget, as she kissed her niece over and over again as if the parting were to be for years and not for days.

With a foot on the step of her carriage she looked back over her shoulder, feeling terribly tempted to send the carriage to the stables, and telegraph to her lawyer to come down and see her instead of dragging her up to town.



[RALPH ARMITAGE, KNEELING DOWN BY HER SIDE, SAID, HOARSELY, "VIOLET, HAVE I WAITED LONG ENOUGH?"]

But common-sense told her it was a pity to upset an arrangement which had been made after due consideration, unless there was an adequate reason for the change of purpose, so she sighed and resigned herself, wishing the visit to town were well over, and she was safe back again.

To Violet it was almost a relief to be alone, although she was so fond of her aunt. Now she could sit still with her hands clasped on her lap and her head thrown back against the cushion of the chair, and think—think—the weary hours away.

When Lady Stapleton was with her she was afraid of sighing lest she should provoke a glance of compassion, afraid of doing nothing for fear of a remark on the efficacy of work for a troubled mind.

Yet she knew that it was meant in all kindness, and probably due to the instructions her aunt had received from Lady Mayne, who was active in writing letters, if in nothing else.

It was now autumn, and the leaves of the trees had turned to a golden brown, and only a few roses lingered on a southern wall.

Violet looked at them wistfully, thinking how lovingly she would have woven them into a cross for her husband's grave, if he had only been allowed to rest in the sunny little churchyard on the hill.

Mabel's father, Mr. Ingham, had reluctantly been obliged to refuse to let a tablet be put up to Mr. Sartoris's memory in the church. There were names of many of his family there, but that of John Dalrymple Sartoris—"the suicide"—could only be represented by significant blank.

Violet had been much troubled about it; but Lady Stapleton was obliged to admit that the Rector was right, although at first she was as indignant as her niece.

"All alone! all alone for the rest of my life!" thought Violet, as she sat before the fire in the lesser drawing-room, her feet on the fender, her fingers idly playing with a few white roses on her lap. "Some day I think I

shall adopt a little boy, and make him take the name of Sartoris, and then if he turns out nice I shall feel as proud of him as if he were really my son. At any rate, it would be something to live for, and I don't know of anything else."

A sigh, and then the door opened, and somebody came quickly across the room. Her heart beat with a suffocating sense of expectation—expectation of what or whom she she could not have said.

The ornamental screen behind her chair was nearly upset as Ralph Armitage came quickly round it, and kneeling down by her side, said, hoarsely,—

"Violet, have I waited long enough?"

She had expected she knew not whom, but certainly not the man who knelt beside her. She shrank away from him, as far as the limits of the chair would allow.

"Waited for what, Mr. Armitage?" she asked, as proudly and scornfully as she could.

"For the fulfilment of your promise," his glowing eyes fixed with an absolutely hungry gaze upon her face.

"A promise wrung from me when I was half mad! You could not think it would bind me long?" her eyes wide open as if with terror, and her chest heaving.

"It will bind you just as long as my life happens to last," with a smile, his hands clutching nervously at the arm of the chair.

"No. You have no right to come here, and say such things," summoning all her courage.

"I have a right to come and claim you," gravely.

"You have none—none," excitedly.

"Haven't I?" with a curious look on his thin face. "Do you remember the storm? You thought your friend would be killed by the lightning. You asked me to go and save him. A man does not go out and face death for nothing. I exacted a promise—it was the least you could expect—you promised to be my wife under one condition, that condition was kept," his face growing livid in spite of

his strongest effort to look composed; "and that promise binds you to be my wife when the year of mourning is over."

"Oh, Mr. Armitage, have pity," clasping her hands imploringly. "You could not wish to have me if I didn't love you!"

"I could wish to have you if your consent were to sign my death-warrant," a glow of passion kindling in his face.

"Oh! release me—release me!"

"Never. No, dearest, your beauty has done me harm enough; it has robbed me of peace, it has made my life a curse. If you break your promise you are perjured."

"Then perjured I must be," with a sigh of desperation.

A scowl came across his face, his eyes flashed.

"If you throw me over, 'pon my honour I'll kill myself. Isn't one suicide enough for your conscience?"

Her face went down on her hands, a shiver ran from head to foot.

"Violet, will you throw me over?"

No answer.

"Violet, before another sun comes my death shall be on your head. It is no joke—I mean it."

"Oh no, no!" she cried, "you could not be so wicked!"

"If it is a sin I can't help it. Keep your word, and I keep my life."

"Oh, this is cruel—cruel," she sobbed; but the next moment his arm was round her, and he drew her to his heaving chest, with almost a sob of joy.

She wrenched herself away from him with a convulsive shudder. Not yet—if ever—should his lips pollute her own.

He looked down on her shrinking figure, and a pain shot through his heart as if a stiletto had pierced it.

"Swear that you will not be talked out of it!"

Not then, but half-an-hour later she took the fatal oath, when worn out by passionate pleadings and threats which bewildered her brain.

(To be continued.)



["WHO WAS THAT DISAGREEABLE-LOOKING FELLOW?" ASKED LANCELOT SILVESTER.]

NOVELETTE.]

A NOBLE FORGIVENESS.

—O—

CHAPTER I.

A LOVERS' MEETING.

"Why, Vic, where are you going?" asked Marion Silvester as she entered her cousin's room, just in time to see her placing a coquettish little hat upon her well-shaped head, and surveying herself in a cheval glass with evident satisfaction.

"You know well enough where I am off to, Marion, without asking any questions," returned Victoria Barrington laughing. "And now, like a dear old girl, just tell me if I shall do?"

"Of course you will, you small sprite; and now I suppose there will be nothing more seen of you for the next two hours. I only hope auntie won't want you, for I shall not know what to say to her."

"You may say anything you like, as long as you don't tell her the truth, for if she once found out that I met dear old Phil, and had those lovely walks with him, she would never let me out of her sight. That is the worst of old maids; they seem to have no hearts at all, and expect all the world to be like themselves. I really believe auntie would wish me to sit with her from morning till night, and do nothing but talk *goody*, and work at those endless flannel petticoats for her pet mission. Why, if it were not for you, Marion, what an awful life I should lead!"

"And yet, Vic," replied her cousin quietly, "I am sure auntie is very fond of you, and would be glad to see you happy; but she certainly does not like the Murrys, and would not care to hear of the growing intimacy between you and Philip. Of course you know your own business best, little Vic; but, like

auntie, I took a dislike to them at our first interview. The mother is too *grand* altogether, and there is an underhand manner about Edith which I do not understand; and as for Philip I consider he is an arrant flirt, and I would not believe a word he says."

"I would," replied Vic warmly. "Phil and I are the best of friends, and I will not hear anything against him; in my opinion he is perfect."

"I am sorry you think so, little woman. I only hope he may ever continue to merit your good opinion; but as for you two being friends, you can't take me in so easily, you scamp. You're about as much friends as—"

"As you and Felix Emmerson," retorted Vic laughing; "don't try and look so innocent, Marion, for you know I caught you together in the lovers' walk the other day, and I have not forgotten what I heard you say."

"Vic, you are a little wretch! What did you hear?"

"Ah! that would be telling too much; never mind, Marion, as long as you keep my secrets, I'll not betray yours. But if you don't help me as much as you can, won't I split, that's all!"

And throwing her arms around her cousin's neck she gave her a hearty kiss; then running out of the room before she could reply to her, went downstairs, and across the well-cut lawn into the shrubbery beyond.

"Five minutes late, darling!" said a handsome young fellow, as Vic appeared round the corner. "I had almost given you up."

"As long as you do not *quite*, I don't care," she answered, glancing up at him brightly; "and now that I have come, what have you to say to me?"

"That you look prettier every time I see you, little Vic."

"Is that all?" she laughed.

"No, not all, dearest! I love you more every day. Indeed, I could not live without you now."

"I see no reason why you should try to do

so," she replied, with a glorious light shining from her bright blue eyes.

"Yes, Vic, there are reasons, I am not rich, you know, and I should be too proud to ask you to share my poverty. If I had only money, darling, I should never let you out of my sight," and he drew her gently to him.

"Don't let the need of money keep you away from me, Phil. I do not shrink from being poor if you do not."

"My sweet darling!" he answered softly, "but I am only making three hundred a year. Could you live on that?"

"Indeed I could," returned the girl, with a smile passing over her sweet face, for she knew she was her aunt's heiress, and that however small her lover's income might be, it could not affect her in any way. But she was glad to think Philip Murray did not know of her expected wealth, and determined not to tell him of it, feeling she would rather be won for herself alone.

"I hardly think you would be able to manage it, little Vic. I am afraid you are an extravagant young woman, and would require all my earnings to dress upon, for I don't believe I ever see you twice in the same costume!"

"Oh! that is auntie's fault; she is always giving me new things, and of course I like to put them on when I come out to see you; but I should be well content to be economical if I could please you by being so."

"Well then, darling, you will have to try what you can do, for I expect I shall put you to the test before long; for Vic, my little Vic, you don't know how I love you, child;" and taking her in his arms he kissed her again and again.

"Oh! Phil," she said, "I am so—so happy!"

"I am glad of that, sweet one," he answered tenderly; "but you must keep our secret; no one must know of our love, my pet. To the world we must be friends—nothing more; do you understand, dear?"

"Yes, Phil; I will not mention anything you do not wish me to do. Of course I should like everyone to know that you care for me, but after all, it has more to do with ourselves than anyone else, hasn't it?"

"Much more, little Vic; and you will have to be very patient, and wait a long time till I can claim you. Do you think you will grow tired of me, sweetest?"

"Never, dear; rest assured while my life lasts I shall love you with my whole heart—I could not change."

"My own true darling!" he replied, earnestly. "I only wish I could have an open engagement, but at present it is impossible."

"Why, dear Phil? Can you not tell me your reason? I would like to have your confidence."

"No, Vic; you must not question me, if you love me, child, you must have trust in me too."

"As you will," she answered, with a shadow of regret in her voice. "I will believe whatever you do is for the best."

"That is right, dearest, and I have no doubt it will all end well for us someday. But you must be very careful, and not give anyone cause to suspect there is more than friendship between us."

"Very well, Phil," she replied, laughing. "If this is friendship, dear, I should be perfectly contented to have nothing more all my life. And now good-night, old boy; it is getting dark, and I must go in."

"Good-night, darling!" he replied, and after one long kiss they parted.

When Philip Murray returned home his sister met him in the hall with an eager look upon her face.

"Have you seen Nora?" she asked. "Mary says she came here about an hour ago, and on being told you were in the garden she went out to look for you."

"What business had Mary to tell her where I was?" he answered impatiently. "Another time order her to show Nora in the drawing-room, and let her wait till I come in. I suppose she is still talking about, and nice and tired she'll be, poor girl," and he turned to go out of the door again.

"May I come with you?" said Edith Murray. "We might as well walk together until we find her, and then I suppose you would rather have my room than my company."

"Undoubtedly I should," he returned coolly; "but as I want to talk to you, you may as well join me now."

"You are a nice sort of brother to have," she answered, laughing; "politeness is certainly not one of your strong points."

"Very likely," he said, indifferently. "I don't think it runs much in our family."

"Speak for yourself, old boy," she retorted, smiling; "but I did not come out with you to discuss either how nice or how nasty we were, but simply to hear whether you met Vic to-night."

"Of course I did," he replied, impatiently. "You knew I was going to meet her, and if you had been a sister worth having, you would have taken care Nora didn't come to look for me."

"I hardly see that I am to be blamed for that," she answered, "for none of us expected her down before next week, and I can't think what made her alter her plans."

"Nor can I, Edith," he replied, gravely; "but where do you suppose she is now; for we have been very nearly round the grounds, and she is nowhere to be seen at present?"

"I will go and ask Thomas," she answered. "I saw him watering the greenhouse just now; perhaps he has seen her," and without another word she ran across the lawn to question the gardener.

In a few minutes she returned, and told Philip that Thomas had noticed Nora going down the moss paths about an hour ago, and after a short time she had retraced her steps, and had taken the nearest road towards the station.

"It is a great nuisance about Nora coming

down to-night unexpectedly; but I will very soon put things all right with her. I suppose she saw me walking about with Vic, and did not like to join us."

"I hope you were not being very loving," said Edith, laughing; "if you were, it is no wonder Nora went away."

"Be good enough to keep your jokes to yourself," replied her brother, coldly. "Vic and I are only friends, nothing more."

Philip Murray turned a shade paler as he listened, that was all; but he was not the man to lose his self-possession, especially in his sister's presence, as she was far keener sighted than he cared about, and had already learnt more than he wished her to know about his affairs; but he was aware that she was devoted to him, and would not talk, at least against his interest; so he sometimes found it convenient to make her useful, and at the present moment he needed a little assistance.

"Oh! indeed?" replied the girl, in a malicious tone of voice. "Then I wonder you do not go and call upon her at her aunt's house, instead of having clandestine meetings in the shrubberies."

"When I want your opinion I will ask for it," he said, in the same hard voice. "You are getting a great deal too talkative, Edith, and I have a good mind not to tell you anything more!"

"You need not fear me, dear old boy," she said, in her most coaxing manner. "I have never deserted you, and I think you might trust me now. I know you really love Nora, Phil; but Vic has the money, and the creditors are becoming rather impatient. That is how the land lays, isn't it?"

"Yes; you're pretty near the mark, Edith. Langley says he can't wait any longer, and Taylor and Hamilton the same, and I'm altogether in a terrible mess. I am going to see them all to-morrow, and ask them to give me another year, and if they will only do that, I may be able to settle something before then; if not, I must be missing when the time comes."

"Don't say that," said Edith, with feeling; for she really cared for her brother more than for anyone else in the world. "We could not spare you, Phil; it would be much wiser of you to marry Vic, and pay your debts comfortably with her money."

"It is all very well to talk of Vic's wealth, Edie, but I don't feel quite sure it is not all a 'myth.' I flashed about the subject a great deal to-night, and she quite spoke as if she had no expectations."

"You don't mean it, Phil? Oh, it can't be true! Why, a number of people have told us that she is Miss Lawrence's heiress!"

"Yes; but it may be only talk. And as for numbers of people, we really know scarcely anyone in the place; we are only going from what we have heard from the servants, and they are very likely to have made some mistake. Vic is a very nice girl, with a large fortune at her back; but I should be sorry to have anything to do with her without it. The thing is, how am I to find out the truth. Can you help me?"

"I think I can, Phil. I will call upon her to-morrow, and I will let you hear the result in the evening. Will that do?"

"Splendidly!" he returned; "and now we must go in to supper, as the mater is waiting for us, and we are already late."

CHAPTER II.

OLD MAIDS HAVE HEARTS.

"AUNTIE," said Vic, the following morning, "I have had a letter from Lancelot Silvester, saying he is coming down to-day. Shall I order the spare room to be prepared, and then all would be ready if he likes to stay?"

"If you wish it, my dear," answered Miss Lawrence, kindly. "Marion is a good girl, and I will always welcome her brother for her sake."

"And his own, auntie, for you know he is a great pet of yours."

"Yes, he is a nice lad, and as long as he is contented here he can remain; but there is not much to amuse a young man at Bracondale."

"Why, auntie, there's you," replied Vic, mischievously. "What more can he want?"

"A great deal more, I should say, my dear," replied Miss Lawrence, smiling; "but, perhaps, his cousin Vic thinks she can make up for my deficiencies—ah, child?"

"You dear old lady!" said Vic, throwing her arms around her aunt's neck. "Lance and I understand each other perfectly. We are cousins, and nothing more, so don't make insinuations."

"My dear, I never made any insinuations. It is a case of guilty conscience I'm afraid. Why, Vic, what are you blushing about? If you care for him you need not hide the fact from me, as there is nothing which would please me better than to see you two marry. He is a fine young fellow, said I would rather my sister's son should share my fortune with you than any other."

"Would you, auntie? That is very kind of you; but the worst part of it is he has never asked me; so you see, until he does, I can neither accept nor refuse him, can I?"

"Of course not, child, you are right not to think of any man unless he has really proposed to you; but I considered it just as well you should know my wishes on the subject."

"Quite as well," returned Vic, with a merry twinkle in her eyes; "and if he does not ask me, auntie, it won't be my fault, for I'll give him plenty of opportunities."

"My dear Vic, I hope you'll do nothing of the sort. I should indeed be shocked if you gave Lancelot cause to think you were running after him."

"Don't be alarmed, auntie, I won't do anything very dreadful; he shall do all the running after me, and I'll go quietly on, and pretend I don't see him coming; and let him catch me if he wishes to do so; and then I must seem to be very much surprised, and tell him he had better consult you first. Would that do?" queried the girl, going into peals of laughter at Miss Lawrence's distressed expression of face.

"I cannot understand you, Vic, and I can only trust you are not so dippant as you pretend to be. Love is no laughing matter, child; to some it brings exquisite happiness, and makes their lives on earth a perfect Paradise; to others it causes nothing but sorrow and disappointment, and that trouble, when once experienced, is never likely to be forgotten."

"Auntie, dear old auntie," said Vic lovingly, "surely you have never known such sorrow? I have always thought you were too old to love any one very much."

"Coldness is often a cloak worn to hide a broken heart, my child, and that is generally the reason why old maids are thought so disagreeable. They have most of them had some great grief, and have shut themselves out from the world in consequence, and refused all sympathy, until their friends have grown tired of them; and they soon find there is no one left to care for them; so putting on the armour of reserve to help them bear their trial secretly, they go through life, unloving and unloved."

"Auntie, do tell me, have you had some deep heart sorrow, and have not told me all these years! Oh! why did you not let me comfort you before?" and the girl knelt beside her aged protectress, and laid her head affectionately upon her breast.

"You have been too young, Vic, to understand such things, and I should not have told you now, had I not wished you to look at your future in a serious light."

"You dear old lady, I am serious enough, but I must have my little jokes even with you and cousin Lance," replied Vic, smiling; "and you would not like me to be always quiet, would you, auntie?"

"Perhaps not, my child; but I should be

grieved to see you flirt even with Lancelot Silvester, and still more sorry to see him flirt with you. There are more lives wrecked through senseless flirtation than you can realize. Men like to amuse themselves with girls they admire, without one thought of what suffering they may cause them in the future; so don't look upon love as sport, Vic, but as the most serious thing in your life."

"I will, dear auntie," replied the girl quietly; "and now will you tell me your history? I should so like to hear it."

"Well, Vic, as you really wish it, I suppose I must give you my confidence, but do not speak of it afterwards, even to me, for, old as I am, the subject is still painful to me."

"You can rely upon my silence," answered the girl gently, and then clasping Miss Lawrence's hand she said no more.

"Forty-five years ago I was just your age, Vic, and the world seemed bright to me indeed. I was the youngest of my family, and was made a great pet of; my will seemed to be law amongst them all, and I did not know what care meant. Three of my sisters married, and then there was only Bertha, your dear mother, left to keep me company, and we were inseparable. She was just one year my elder, and it was settled we should come out together, and I shall never forget my first ball. It was there I met the love of my life, and for a short time at least I was intensely happy."

"What was his name, auntie?" asked Vic with interest.

"Roderick Napier; and I think he was the handsomest man I ever saw. He was tall, and well built, decidedly dark, and he had powerful mesmeric eyes, which seemed to compel you to love him, and draw you under his influence, even against your will. Well, that evening he gained an introduction to your grand-parents, who took a fancy to him at once, and invited him to their house, after having ascertained from a friend of his, that he was a man of good family and position. At that time we were very well off, and Roderick lost no opportunity of making himself agreeable to me; in fact, he was my shadow; there was never a day that he was not with me, and although he had not really asked me to be his wife, there is no doubt he would have done so, if my father had not suddenly lost his money; but when misfortune came, he deserted me, and I never heard of him again, until I saw his marriage in the papers."

"Oh! auntie, how you must have suffered," said Vic. "But surely he did not leave you because he knew you would be poor. Did you have no quarrel, no misunderstanding?"

"Not a word, my dear, no one could have been more loving than he was the last time we met, and I was so wildly happy, but my sunshine was too bright to last, and when I knew the truth, I thought my heart would have broken; but I found to my regret that sorrow does not kill, and I had to live, whether I wished it or no. Perhaps it was well that I had very little leisure to think about myself and my troubles, for I had at once to set to work and find employment; and I decided at length to enter a hospital as nurse; and I got on very well for some time, and took great interest in the poor sufferers around me. But after three years my health failed me, and the doctors said I had not strength for such continual pressure, and a lighter situation was found for me, which I gladly accepted. I went to take care of a dear old gentleman who was paralysed, and lived with him for twenty-five years, when he died; and so grateful was he for all my attention to him, that he left me the whole of his fortune, and this estate, and once more I was a rich woman. But my troubles were not at an end there, for just at that time your dear mother, who had been married for about ten years, died from scarlet fever, and your father and your brother soon followed her, and you were left a tiny baby with no one to look after you; so I brought you home with me, little Vic, and you have been my child ever since."

"Oh! auntie, how good you have been to

me!" cried Vic. "I will never think you are cold again, and I feel I could not live without you!"

"You will have to, some day, little Vic; and when I am gone you will be a rich woman, for I have left you all my fortune, which I hope you will make good use of. Will you try, dear?"

"Indeed I will, auntie; but why should you make me your heiress? Surely it would be better to divide your money into three portions, and give Lance, and Marion, and me each a part; it hardly seems fair that I should have it all."

"Why, Vic; do you want to refuse such a gift as the Bracondale Estate? No, child, you are my favourite niece, and I wish you to inherit my property. If you want Lance to share it, you had better marry him. I have already told you I should be greatly pleased at the match; but if it cannot be, the young man must work, and make a home for himself, and as for Marion, if she does not soon settle, I will leave her two thousand pounds, which with the fifty pounds a year she inherited from her mother will keep her from want, if not in luxury."

"Auntie, why should you care for me so much more than for the other two? We three are equally related to you."

"Quite so, little Vic; but I have brought you up as my own child, and until six years ago I never saw the others, for their mother—my sister Gertrude—was my senior by many years, and when she married she went immediately out to New Zealand with her husband, and lived there all the rest of her life. And when she became a widow she wrote and asked me to look after her children, if anything should happen to her, also. But she lived for some time after that, and when she died she left Lancelot two hundred a year, and Marion fifty, so they both have a little, although not much. Marion, as you know, has lived with me ever since, and will continue to do so as long as I am spared, unless she marries. And Lancelot has his own rooms near the War-office, where he was fortunate enough to obtain a clerkship. I give him a hundred a year for pocket-money, and if you wish it very much, I will leave him two thousand pounds as well as Marion. Will that please you, Vic?"

"I would rather you made it five thousand, auntie," said Vic, smiling.

"Nonsense! my dear," said Miss Lawrence, half amused and half vexed. "If I give away all my fortune how is Bracondale to be kept up? And now I have not time to talk to you any more to-day, for I want to drive over to Market Handbury to do some shopping."

"Shall I come with you, auntie? I don't like your going alone."

"Not to-day, dear child; you must remain at home with Marion to welcome Lancelot. And now run away, for I have a letter to write, and it is just lunch time."

"Very well, auntie," replied Vic, "I will not torment you any longer," and after giving Miss Lawrence a loving embrace, she went up to her own room to take off her morning-dress.

CHAPTER III.

VIC PRETENDS TO BE POOR.

MISS LAWRENCE'S carriage was scarcely out of sight when the butler announced Miss Murray was in the drawing-room.

"What a bother!" cried Vic, as soon as this solemn functionary had withdrawn. "I hope she won't remain long, or we shall not be able to drive down in the dogcart to meet Lance at the station."

"Well, put on your hat, and say you are going out," replied Marion; "she could not stop then, particularly if you tell her you have to meet a train."

"No, I suppose not; but I hardly like to do so, because she is Phil's sister, you see."

"Oh, that's it, is it, Vic? Well then, run

in to her at once, and I will go and meet Lance by myself."

"You had better wait for me, Marion, as auntie does not much approve of either of us driving alone. It really is very unfortunate; but it can't be helped, and if she does not go in ten minutes, we will send Alfred off with the luggage cart, and then Lance can either drive or walk, as he pleases."

"Yes, that will do excellently; and now, dear, we must really go to Miss Murray, or she will say we kept her waiting while we were 'titivating.'"

"Well, for once she would be mistaken; though I really wish I had on a simpler costume, but I put this on in order to 'mash' Lance."

"Vic, I am ashamed of you," said Marion Silvester, laughing; "but it is the first time I have ever heard you regret being handsomely dressed, and I fail to understand your reason for it now, as Philip Murray's sister is waiting to see you."

"That is just it, old girl. Do you know I want them all to think that I am poor, and in future I shall always wear something simple when I go to meet Phil. I have a fancy to be won for myself; it would be dreadful to me to be sought for my money."

"I think you are right, Vic; that would at least prove the young man. So he is trying to win you, you sly fox. You have let the cat out of the bag at last," said Marion, laughing.

"You are too sharp altogether," said Vic, with pretended vexation; he has won me already—for a friend, nothing more."

"Of course, dear," replied Marion, laughing again; "and now are you coming, or shall I go and say you have a headache? I am really getting quite clever at telling 'bangs' for you, and no wonder, for you keep me well up to the mark."

"You are a wretch," said Vic, slipping her arm through her cousin's; "but I should not like to be without you for all that; and now let us go to Edith, or she will be tired of waiting."

"I should fancy she was that long ago," returned Marion; "but I really think you had better despatch Alfred, for she certainly won't leave at present."

"A wise suggestion, dear," said Vic, ringing the bell at the same time; and after having given her orders, the two girls crossed the hall, and entered the drawing-room.

"I am so sorry to have kept you waiting," said Vic, graciously, as she shook Edith's hand warmly; "but I was unable to come in before, as I had to see about the cart being sent off to meet Marion's brother. I think you have seen my cousin before, have you not?"

"Yes, I have the pleasure of knowing Miss Silvester," said Edith Murray; and the two girls, who had a mutual antipathy to each other, coldly extended the tips of their fingers in greeting.

Then Edith turned once more to Vic.

"I have come begging," she laughed. "I take a great interest in the Owygam mission, and they are in a terrible state just now for want of funds. Our London clergyman has written to know if I can assist him in getting up a subscription, for the poor things are all starving to death, and if five thousand pounds are not sent out immediately it will be too late to save them. No smaller sum would be of any use, for it is an immense territory, and thickly populated."

"How very sad!" said Marion. "If the accounts are true, I think something should be done. Anyway, I will give you a pound towards it," and taking her purse from her pocket she handed a sovereign to Edith. "I am sorry it is not more, Miss Murray, but it is all that I can afford to do."

"Indeed, I am most grateful," replied Edith, "I never expected you would give me anything. It was really Miss Barrington who I hoped would help me, and I still trust she will do so."

"You have come to the wrong person," said

Vic, smiling. "Marion is the Ceresus; I am as poor as the proverbial church mouse."

"Surely you are joking, Miss Barrington?" replied Edith, with her eyes wide open. "You cannot mean what you say?"

"Why not?" answered Vic, quietly, for she was struck by the look of almost dismay upon her visitor's face, and determined to carry on the part she was playing.

"Because I have always heard that you were Miss Lawrence's heiress," returned Edith, forgetting to be cautious in her excitement. "Everyone says so!"

"Do they?" laughed Vic. "Then it is a pity people should talk of what does not concern them. I always find, Miss Murray, that what the world says is incorrect. My dear aunt has been kind enough to bring me up, but I must soon look out for a fresh home now; and I am thinking of advertising for a situation."

"Dear me!" said Edith. "I am surprised; what stupid mistakes are made. Then I suppose they really meant you instead of Miss Barrington," she continued, turning to Marion.

"I always keep my affairs to myself, Miss Murray," answered Marion Silvester. "I never take any interest in other people's business, and I object to their interfering with mine."

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure," said Edith, growing very red. "I did not intend to offend you, but knowing Miss Barrington so well, I naturally took a pleasure in talking of her welfare."

"Marion is only in fun," said Vic, beginning to feel very uncomfortable at the turn the conversation was taking; but before she had time to say another word, the door was suddenly thrown open, and an eminently handsome young man had entered the room.

Edith was sitting behind a small screen, and he could not see her, so he did not hesitate to make a rush at the two girls, who had both stepped forward to meet him, and throwing his arms around them he gave them a giant's hug.

"Well, I am glad to see you!" he exclaimed, gaily; then he gave Marion a hearty embrace, and released her. "Now Vic, it is your turn," he continued, laughing at his cousin's strenuous efforts to get away.

"Do be quiet, Lance!" she said, in an undertone, giving him a furious pinch.

But Lancelot's back was still turned towards Edith, and although she had come from behind the screen to look at what was going on, he did not see her, and thought that Vic was only trying to cheat him out of his usual kiss.

"None of your jokes, old girl!" he said. "I mean to have one," and taking her pretty little head in both his hands he very nearly smothered her with kisses.

"Lance," said Marion, in a voice shaking with laughter—for it was most ridiculous to watch poor Vic's struggles for freedom—and at any other time she would thoroughly have enjoyed the scene, but with Edith Murray gazing at them with her cold, grey eyes, she was anxious to put an end to it as quickly as possible.

"Lance!" she repeated, louder, "let me introduce you to Miss Murray; I don't think you can be aware that she is in the room!"

In a second, Vic was dropped like a hot potato, and he turned round with a slight flush overspreading his manly face; but young though he was, he had a great deal of self-possession, and as soon as the introduction was over, he commenced talking away with perfect composure.

"Marion is right," he began. "I did not see you, Miss Murray, or I should not have entered the room quite so like an overgrown schoolboy."

"I hope you will not mind me," replied Edith, quietly; "it was most amusing to see your battle with Miss Barrington, but I fear she did not enjoy it as much as I did."

"I did not enjoy it at all," laughed Vic. "Cousins are horrid things to have, Miss

Murray. I hope for your sake you do not own any?"

"I believe I have a few," she answered, carelessly, "but I have not the honour of their acquaintance."

"What a blessing for you," retorted Vic, smiling, "at least if they are anything like Lance."

"I don't think you seem to object much to Mr. Silvester," she replied, with a malicious ring in her voice which made Vic colour.

"You are right, Miss Murray," said Lancelot Silvester, noticing the confusion of his little favourite. "Vic and I are like brother and sister, and I hope we shall always continue to be so."

"Are you," she replied, coldly. "Well, all I can say, is, I am glad my brothers do not treat me in the same way. And now, good-bye, Miss Barrington, I am sorry you are unable to help me with the mission, but if you can't, it is, of course, no fault of yours."

"No, it is impossible," said Vic, shaking her hand, and then she rang the bell.

"Good-bye, Miss Silvester, thank you for your generous contribution."

"You are quite welcome," said Marion, smiling at the satire of her remark.

Lancelot moved towards the door, and, opening it, bowed coldly to her as she passed out of the room, and seeing the butler was there to attend to her, he quickly returned to his sister and cousin.

"What an awful girl!" he said. "Where ever does she live?"

"Do be careful, old boy," replied Vic; "she really has not gone yet, and may hear your remarks through the open window."

"Well, really, I shouldn't much mind if she did, for I never took such a dislike to anyone in my life as I did to her at first sight. I could believe anything of her; I hope she is not a friend of yours, Vic, or Marion's either."

"I think Marion mistrusts her as much as you do," replied Vic, gently. "As for myself, I do not know enough about her to form an opinion, but as she is our next-door neighbour, I always try to be civil to her."

"You don't mean to say they have taken Briar-bank," said Lancelot in dismay. "She is indeed unpleasantly close. I could imagine her standing on the other side of the hedge, to listen to what we were talking about."

"Well then dear, don't tell me any of your secrets in that part of the garden, and then it won't matter if she does," laughed Vic. "And now come and have some lunch, for I am sure you must be very hungry; I never saw you so fierce before!" and giving him her hand she pulled him out of the depths of an easy chair into which he had thrown himself, after his last remarks.

"Thanks, old lady, I'll come if you will promise to sit with me while I am feeding, will you, dear?" he asked, smiling down at her.

"Of course I will, you rascal, and Marion will come too."

"I am not so sure of that," said Marion, smiling, getting up from her seat at the same time, and slipping her arm round her cousin's waist. "Perhaps I'm not wanted," she continued, looking mischievously at her brother, "for Lance did not invite me."

"But you know I always want you, dear," said Lancelot Silvester kindly, and the three went off and sat in the dining-room, chatting merrily until they heard the wheels of the brougham draw up at the front door.

"Why, here's auntie!" cried Vic, looking out at the window, and they ran out to meet her, and give her a hearty welcome home.

In the morning he had been to call on Nora Mackenzie, the girl he really cared for, and who had been engaged to him for the past two years—ever since the death of her mother; but although he loved her better than anyone else in the world, he had quite made up his mind to give her up for Vic should she have a sufficient fortune to satisfy him, but until he should ascertain the extent of her wealth and expectations, he wished to keep Nora in his power; so feeling she might be annoyed at having seen him in the shrubbery walk, talking to another girl, he went up by an early train, and arrived at Nora's house just as she and her father had finished breakfast, and he had been shown into their little drawing-room, which, if not handsomely furnished, was very elegant and pretty.

And there Nora joined him, but how changed from the devoted girl he had parted with one week before!

She bowed to him slightly, when he came forward to meet her, and apparently never saw the hand he held out to her. She did not ask him to sit down, but looking at him coldly, inquired if he had come to fetch the things he had left in her keeping.

There were not many, but they were the only valuables he possessed in the world, and when he quitted London for the summer months, he had begged her to take care of them for him until he returned, for fear he should lose them in a strange house with servants he knew nothing about.

"You know I have not," he replied, turning pale. "Nora! what is the matter with you to-day? You are not yourself," and he came closer to her, as if to take her in his arms; but she drew herself up with the dignity of a stately queen, and looked at him steadily in the face.

"Mr. Murray," she said, "I decline to have any conversation with you. I am only glad I have found you out before it is too late; remember our engagement is at an end; for after what I witnessed the other evening I will have nothing more to do with you. Here are your things; I was going to return them to you to-day by registered packet, but it will be better for you to take them yourself. You will find all the presents you have given me in a small box inside," and she handed the parcel to him.

Philip Murray stood looking blankly at her. She had ever been so gentle and yielding to his wishes, and in one day she had changed; and he knew, now that he had lost her, that he had never loved or admired her so much before.

"Nora, for Heaven's sake, listen to me!" he exclaimed. "I love you truly, my darling! and I can easily explain away the cause of your displeasure."

"Thanks!" she said, interrupting him; "I require no explanation, and I will receive none," and she rang the bell before he could speak again and left the room; and as the maid was already in the passage with the opened door in her hand, there was nothing left for him to do, but to take up his hat and his parcel and leave the house!

When Philip Murray took his seat in his office at the usual hour he could do no work. Never before had he felt so completely upset; and the head of his department, noticing how ill and worn he looked, advised him to go quietly home, and take a week's rest, and very gladly he accepted his friend's offer.

When out in the air again he felt somewhat better, and turning his steps towards the City, he soon found himself outside Langley's, the well-known money-lender; and he went in, to entreat him to wait for another year, but Mr. Langley would not listen to him at all. However, after much talking, it was settled that he should pay one-half of the amount owing, namely, five hundred pounds, in six months' time, and the other half at the end of the year; and the matter having thus ended, Philip left the office with a lighter mind, saying to himself, "If Vic is worth anything

CHAPTER IV.

A GOOD EXCUSE.

PHILIP MURRAY returned home that afternoon, with a discontented look upon his face. He had had a troubled day, and it had not improved his frame of mind.

she will pay him off before that," and he wended his way to his other creditors.

Hamilton was a first-class tailor at the West-end, and to him he owed two hundred pounds; and the owner of the shop being a kind-hearted man, and seeing how troubled Philip looked, promised to wait another twelve-month on receiving a written assurance that the money should be paid at the expiration of that time. And, lastly, he went to Crawford's, his bootmaker, to whom he owed fifty pounds, and got a year's reprieve from him also; but for all that he was utterly miserable, and he returned home early in the afternoon, feeling he had only one card to play, and that was Vic; and if she proved worthless he determined to quit the country.

So when Edith re-entered Briar-bank, after her visit to Bracondale, she found her brother walking about in the garden, looking the picture of discontent.

"Why, Phil!" she exclaimed, "you are back early; I did not expect you till seven, and it is only half-past three."

"Yes! I have a week's holiday; my chief, thinking I looked ill, told me I had better have a rest."

"How very kind of him!" said Edith, warmly; "and now if you are tired come in," and they went into the house together, and going into the morning-room, they sat down to have a talk.

"Have you been to see Vic?" asked Philip, looking anxiously at his sister.

"Yes, Phil, I have," replied the girl quietly.

"And what did you discover?" queried the young man, in an impatient voice.

"Nothing good," said Edith, nervously, for she was decidedly afraid of her brother when anything annoyed him. "It has all been a mistake, Phil; Vic's own words were 'that she was as poor as a church mouse.'"

"What made her say so?" he demanded, roughly. "Surely you were not stupid enough to go and ask her?"

"Of course not," she replied, "but I took a subscription list round, and asked Vic to help me, and she said she could not do it; then she told me her aunt had brought her up, and she was now going to look for a situation."

"Are you sure?" said Philip Murray, in a tone of dismay; "perhaps she was only laughing at you."

"No; I am certain she meant it," replied Edith, "for I asked if she was joking, and she assured me she was not."

Now Vic had never said she was not in fun, any more than she had said she was going to look for a situation, although in mischief she had led Edith to understand her so; and thus it is, when things are repeated, a very few words altered will make such a vast difference in the meaning of a sentence. So by the time Philip Murray heard of the conversation, it had come to Vic's having said "she was not joking, and that she was going to look for employment!"

"I am sorry for it," said Philip. "Then who on earth is Miss Lawrence going to leave her money to? Surely not to Miss Silvester!"

"I should not be at all surprised," returned Edith "but when I began to question her, she was so intensely rude I could say no more."

"I wish I could find out," said Philip, more to himself than to his sister.

"Why?" asked Edith. "Would you turn your attentions from one cousin to the other? You're a clever fellow, Phil, but Marion Silvester would not have you, I'm sure, and I should not wish you joy if she would. She would lead you a dreadful life with that overbearing manner of hers."

"Mind your own business, Edith," replied her brother, coldly. "I have no intention of asking Miss Silvester; it would not be fair on Vic to do so."

Edith regarded him silently for a few seconds, then went off into fits of laughter.

"Yes! You would think a great deal of Vic, if you once imagined you had a chance with Marion Silvester, or anyone else who had money. No, Phil, you can't deceive me; you are not one of the high-minded sort."

"Thank you for your opinion, Edith. Have you anything more to say, complimentary or otherwise?"

"Yes. If you behave yourself I will tell you how you can get out of your friendship, as you call it, with Vic, with credit, or at least without dishonour."

"How?" asked Philip Murray with interest, for he always liked to drop a thing in a high-handed kind of way, and pretend he was the injured party instead of the offending one.

"Well!" continued Edith, "Marion Silvester's brother came down while I was there, and he is evidently very fond of Vic, for he did not see me, and he threw his arms around her, and kissed her most affectionately."

"And what did Vic do?" asked Philip, with a smile.

"Oh! of course she made a fuss, but that was only because she knew I was in the room, and should tell you. She must have allowed him to be on most intimate terms with her before, or he never would have attempted such a liberty; so take my advice and watch her. She is sure to be running about with this young man, and then you can affect righteous indignation, and discover that any girl who would speak to another man besides yourself is not the sort of wife you would choose to have," and again she laughed heartily.

"Capital! Edith, you are sharper than I took you to be. Vic will not be looking for me during the daytime, and I shall be sure to meet her about somewhere, taking a walk with young Silvester, and then will be my chance. And now I'll go and smoke a cigar," and without another word he left the room.

The following morning Vic and her cousin Lance went off for a stroll alone, for Marion had a headache, and did not care to accompany them.

"Now, old boy," said Vic, as soon as they were away from the sight and earshot of the village, and had entered a country lane, "how is Kitty? I have been longing to ask after her, but have never had an opportunity."

"She is very well, thank you, dear; but she is still in France, and I don't believe her parents will let her come back for the next two years."

"Never mind, Lance, it will soon be over, and then I suppose you will marry and settle down."

"I wish we could, Vic; but I fear there is no likelihood of any such happiness."

"Why, dear?" asked Vic, in surprise; "does she not care enough for you to marry you when she becomes of age, even without her parents' consent?"

"Quite enough, little Vic; but I will not let her quarrel with her relations for my sake; and so I shall work, and try to improve my position, and in time I hope they will give way. And the sooner they do the better, for Kitty and I intend to keep our engagement on, and the more opposition we meet with, the more determined we become. Old Hartland can't find any objection to me, except that I have not a thousand-a-year, and he won't allow his daughter to begin life on less."

"I never heard such nonsense," said Vic, impatiently. "As long as you have sufficient to pay your way, I think it is far better for you than riches, which usually make people indolent and selfish, and to my mind a pretty bright bijou cottage is much more homelike than a grand mansion."

"So it is, little Vic, and I am sure Kitty could keep up a comfortable little home on my present income, which amounts to just four hundred and fifty pounds; but of course to a man like Mr. Hartland that seems abject poverty, and the sum he has named, barely enough to exist upon; still he would consent

to our union, I believe, if I could obtain that for certain."

"How very kind of him!" said Vic, laughing; "then why does he not give you that amount himself—he would not even miss it!"

"I would rather he did not, old girl. I should wish to support my own wife, and to know that she depends on me for everything."

"I can understand your feelings, dear," said Vic, smiling up at him. "I often regret I have a fortune in expectation, for I should rather feel I had to look to my husband for all things."

"Would you, Vic? Well, I always thought you were such an independent little soul, and that you would rather have sixpence of your own, than a pound of anyone else's."

"So I do in a general way; but I think when you love anyone very dearly those sort of ideas soon disappear."

"Vic, I never knew you so serious before. Tell me, dear girl, has Cupid at last shot an arrow even into your invulnerable heart?"

"Don't ask questions, Lance," she laughed, "or I might be tempted to tell you a big story."

"I can quite believe it," he replied, laughing too, and putting his arm through hers; "but confidence deserves confidence, you know. You are the only one in the world I have told about my Kitty except her own parents. I have never even named her to Marion, and as I trust you so much, surely you can trust me?"

"I can," she replied, looking up at her cousin with a bright smile. "I do love some one very much, but at present it is a secret, so I cannot even tell you his name."

"And I will not ask you to do so, dear," replied Lance, gently, and I earnestly wish you every blessing and happiness, and trust your lover may prove worthy of the prize he has drawn," and he stooped and kissed her brow.

They were in a shady lane, entirely shut in by trees on either side, and imagined themselves to be alone; and so intent had they been on their conversation that they had not seen a figure turn the corner of the road just in front of them, and in another second Vic was facing the man she well-nigh worshipped; and he, coldly looking at her, took off his hat, and passed on, without one word of greeting.

Philip Murray had been watching his opportunity all the morning, and noticing that Vic and her cousin took the quiet country lane for their ramble, determined to walk round in the other direction and meet them; but he never hoped for such a perfect success to his plan, and he smiled bitterly when he had passed her by. He told himself that Vic was indeed in the wrong now, and he felt glad she was so completely in his power.

Had he thought for a moment that Vic had money, he would have acted the injured lover to perfection, and after having made her very miserable he would have generously forgiven her.

But Edith had assured him that Vic was poor, and he was seeking an opportunity to get out of his engagement to her without discredit to himself, and certainly his chance had come.

But so inconsistent is human nature, that although Philip Murray had now no intention of marrying Vic, he felt really angry with her for her conduct, and told himself she could never blame him in any way; and if she was such a disgraceful flirt she would very soon forget all about him, and perhaps even now she had thrown him over for her cousin.

And he wended his way homeward, considering what his next move had better be, for money he must have, but how was he to get it?

"Who was that disagreeable looking fellow?" asked Lancelot Silvester, as soon as Philip Murray had passed out of hearing.

"He is Mr. Murray," answered Vic quietly. "You saw his sister yesterday."

"Yes; and he is no better than she, I should

say," replied Lance, "if one can judge by appearances."

"I should not trust to first impressions if I were you, Lance. I don't think there is anything against either of them; they seem nice people."

"Do they, Vic? Well, I am sorry to differ from your opinion of them, dear, but I would bet anything that that young man is a scoundrel; he carries it in his face!"

"Lance, don't say such things! I know him very well, and like him too!"

"Well, he did not look as if he liked you, old girl. I never saw such a diabolical expression of face before. One would almost imagine he hated you. Have you ever trodden on his pet corn, dear?"

"Perhaps I may have done so," replied Vic, trying to smile; "but I think he was astonished to see you kissing me out in the road, Lance; and really, dear, I wish you would not do such things, it puts me in such an awkward position."

"I am sorry I have displeased you, little Vic, but I did it without thought. My heart was full of prayer for your happiness at the time, and I never noticed anyone coming along not that I can see what it had to do with Mr. Murray or anyone else, except that mysterious someone who is making my small cousin so very good and prim."

"I wish I were good," said Vic, wearily. "Let us walk across the fields home, Lance, I think it is nearer, and I feel tired."

"Are you unwell, dear," said Lancelot, noticing for the first time all the colour had left Vic's face.

"I am all right," she replied, rousing herself. "I have a nervous headache, nothing more. I am sure to be better after lunch."

"I hope so," said her cousin kindly, and they turned into the meadows, and were soon in sight of Bracondale.

CHAPTER V.

PARTED.

A FEW days afterwards Miss Lawrence noticed that Vic looked both pale and ill; and not knowing the secret trouble that was well-nigh breaking her heart, she thought she only wanted rousing, and determined she would give a ball in her own house, much as she disliked it, and try and cheer her. And when Vic heard of her aunt's arrangement she could not decide if she were pleased or no, for she knew Miss Lawrence would invite Philip as well as her other acquaintances, and she dreaded meeting him, for although she had waited for him every evening in the garden he had never joined her, and she remembered with pain the glance of scorn he had given her when she had last seen him. But Miss Lawrence knew nothing of her sorrow, and the invitations were sent off, and at last the night came and everything was ready.

Marion was dressed in a pretty costume of pale pink satin, and Vic wore light blue; and both their dresses were beautifully trimmed with exquisite rare old lace.

"How nice you two girls look!" said Lancelot Silvester, entering the ball-room.

"I am glad you think so," returned Marion. "It is not often that brothers are complimentary."

"He is obliged to be so to-night," laughed Vic, "because he knows if he did not make himself agreeable we would not dance with him. Is not that it, Lance?"

"Of course it is, old lady; and how many will you give me? Let me write them on your programme at once;" and taking one from the many piles of them, placed in various parts of the room, he wrote his initials in four places. "I must have the first waltz and the last, Vic," he said, smiling at her with a look of admiration and affection, "and two in the middle of the evening."

"Oh, no, Lance! not so many," she replied,

for she knew that Philip Murray would be watching her, and she feared he would again misjudge her.

"Why not, little woman?" he queried. "Don't I dance well enough?"

"Of course you do! It is not that, Lance, but you ought to pay attention to the other girls to-night, you know, as you are at home," she answered, looking up at him, and growing rosy-red at the thought of her small deception.

"If that is your only reason, dear," he rejoined, "I shall not let you off!" and handing her the card he took another himself, and marked her name upon it too.

"How many will you give me, Marion?" he asked, turning to his sister.

"The first extra if you like, Lance, but I can't spare you any more to-night."

"I see," he retorted, mischievously, "you prefer other people's brothers to your own."

"Only on particular occasions," she answered, naively, "and this is one of them." "And now, Vic, our friends are arriving; come and do your duty," and the two girls went to their aunt's side, and welcomed their guests warmly.

And the room soon presented a gay appearance, as the girls in their bright costumes came trooping in, following the stately dames in more sombre attire.

"Will you give me this dance, Miss Silvester?" said a grave-looking young man, as the band of the — regiment struck up the first chords of "Day Dreams."

"Certainly," replied Marion, with a happy smile; and in another moment she was gliding gently round the room, clasped in the arms of Felix Emmerton.

"Did you receive my letter this morning?" he asked, tenderly.

"I did," replied Marion, with drooping eyes and heightening colour.

"And what is my answer to be, dear?" he queried, scarcely above a whisper.

For a breathing space she did not reply, then said,—

"You are going to stay with us till to-morrow, Felix. I will talk to you quietly in the morning."

"Marion," he replied, earnestly, "come in here!" and he led her into a smaller apartment, which opened out of the ball-room, in which were arranged card-tables and chess-boards for those who did not care to dance.

"You must tell me my fate at once, sweet one! I could not wait a day longer. Why do you hesitate, my darling? Surely you love me just a little?"

"A great deal, dear!" she replied, with a joyous look; "but, Felix, I do not like to accept you. I shall ruin all your prospects in life."

"Not so, dear girl! I should have no pleasure in living if I could not have you always by my side. You are too true to play with any man's affections, Marion! So if you can say you love me why not promise to be my wife?"

"Because, dear, your father would never give his consent to our union; he told me as much the last time I saw him. He said he trusted you would marry well; and that it was necessary your wife should bring you a large fortune to help you clear off the heavy mortgages on your future estate. Of course, he did not say all that in those very words, but he took me for a walk round the garden, and in a general sort of way it all came out. Doubtless he guessed that we cared for each other!"

"Very likely, sweet one!" replied Felix Emmerton, "but neither my father nor anyone else shall ever keep me from the girl I love. Marion, my darling! give me the right to claim you for my own before all the world, and I will protect you from all care and annoyance. My father would most gladly receive you when he knew we were married."

"No dear, do not tempt me," replied Marion, gently. "I love you too well to allow you to make such a sacrifice. Sir Raphael

would never welcome me as a daughter, and he would most probably quarrel with you on my account, or if he even gave his sanction it would be with reluctance; and Felix, I could not bear being tolerated by your relations."

"My proud pet!" he answered, laughing; "I admire you all the more for your spirit; but tell me, darling, should my father raise no objections to our engagement will you really accept me then?"

"Most gladly," she replied, with a bright smile; "but, Felix, don't dwell upon the possibility of such happiness. I fear it is too good to be true."

"Not at all, my dearest; my parents will both love you for your own dear sake, and they will quickly see you are the best and truest girl on earth."

"You have too good an opinion of me, dear," replied Marion, taking his proffered hand. "You will find that I have many faults, and I should be sorry if you were disappointed in me."

"I could not be that, darling," he answered, gently placing his free hand around her slender waist. "My precious girl," he continued, earnestly; "if anything should part us now, I would never marry anyone."

"Nor I, Felix; I love you too well ever to forget you."

"Bless you for that, Marion," he said, fervently, and, stooping, he kissed her tenderly.

At that moment, Philip Murray entered the room in search of his sister, as he had forgotten to give her the fan he had been carrying in his pocket for her; and he stopped suddenly as he saw the lovers, who were standing in the bay window, behind a tall flower-stand covered with rare exotics and ferns, and as their backs were towards him they were unconscious of his presence. He stood for a minute to listen to their conversation, then turned round with an impatient gesture.

"Confound it," he muttered, "I am just too late. Marion Silvester is not the girl to change her mind; if she loves that fellow she will be true to him, and it would only be a waste of time to woo her," and passing into the ball-room he glanced hastily around in search of Vic, and his lip curled visibly as he beheld her dancing with her cousin. "Why need I spare her?" he thought; "a girl who would have two strings to her bow is not worth consideration, but I will make her suffer if I can; for what right has she to behave in the way she is doing, believing herself to be engaged to me," and he remained watching till the waltz was over, a great bitterness filling his heart.

He was angry with her for being the cause of the quarrel between Nora and himself, he was angry with her because he now imagined she was not an heiress; and, lastly, although he no longer wanted her, he felt exceedingly indignant at her appreciation of Lancelot Silvester. It wounded his pride to see her smile upon another, notwithstanding that he was glad of the excuse to get rid of her.

The waltz was at an end, and Vic was walking beside her cousin with a bright look. She had thoroughly enjoyed her dance; it seemed to arouse her from her gloominess, and make her forget her troubles—at all events, for the time being.

The exercise had brought back the roses to her cheeks, and never had she looked prettier, but hers was not the sort of beauty Philip Murray admired—it failed to charm him.

Nora was his ideal, and she was tall and dark, with Grecian features, which she had inherited from her mother, who was a Greek woman. And little Vic, with her fairy-like figure and saucy face, was quite her antipodes; for while Nora wore her hair in magnificent plaits, arranged classically around her graceful head, Vic gloried in masses of short, golden curls, which fell in natural waves and ripples, and her laughter-loving blue eyes were thickly veiled with long, black

lashes, surmounted by pencilled eyebrows of darkest brown.

She was altogether a bewitching little creature, and at that time she was looking her very best.

"That was splendid dance, Vic," said Lancelot Silvester, looking down at her with a bright smile. "You just suit my step, and I shall make you give me all the extras, with the exception of the one which Marion has promised me."

"No, really, Lance, I can't let you have so many," she replied, laughing. "Auntie wishes us to be very attentive to our guests to-night—she told me so."

"Vic, that is only an excuse. I believe, dear, you want to save all your dances for that wonderful being you told me about, or, rather, wouldn't tell me about. Is it not that, you scamp? for I expect you have got auntie to invite him, whoever he is. Oh!" he continued, laughing, "your blushes have betrayed you, dear, and I shall keep my eyes wide open, and try to discover which of the eligible bachelors you have chosen."

"Do be quiet, Lance," she said, somewhat impatiently, for she had just noticed Philip Murray gazing at her in cold disdain, and knew that he still misjudged her. She left her cousin's side, and held out her hand to him, which he accepted with icy politeness.

"What a cad!" thought Lancelot Silvester, turning away to avoid being introduced to him, and Vic and her lover were once more face to face.

"I am so glad you have come," said Vic, glancing shyly up at him.

"Thank you, Miss Barrington," he replied, in a mocking tone, "not that it appears my presence can affect your happiness in any way. You certainly appeared to enjoy 'Day-Dreams' without my assistance."

"I am very fond of dancing," replied Vic, with all the brightness fading from her face, "but I would gladly give it up if it would please you," she continued, in an undertone.

"Really, Miss Barrington, I require no such sacrifice at your hands," he replied, with a visible sneer. "You should have been off with the old love before you were on with the new;" then, seeing by her sudden pallor that his shot had told, he turned and left her without another word.

Vic stood for some seconds almost paralyzed with grief, but she knew that she must arouse herself, and attend to her aunt's friends, and she did so with a great effort, and there was not a dance in which she did not join.

She never had appeared more sparkling, and she was sought by all present, except one, both on account of her graceful movements and light step, and for her saucy remarks and ready repartee, which amused and enchained her partners by turns.

But little Vic was miserable, notwithstanding her apparent gayness, for Philip Murray never so much as looked at her, and she felt as though her heart would break.

"I must speak to him," she told herself continually, but the opportunity never seemed to come, and there was only one more waltz upon the programme, for which she was engaged to Lancelot Silvester; and feeling thoroughly weary she was leaning against the conservatory door for support, when she heard a sound from within, and turned to see who was there.

It was Philip Murray, and with a wildly beating heart she went to his side.

"Phil!" she said gently. "I am more than sorry if I have vexed you, and I have come to ask you to forgive me. But dear, there has been some terrible misunderstanding between us; indeed—indeed, you have misjudged me!" and she laid her hand upon his arm, and looked pleadingly up in his face.

But he shook her off roughly.

"It is useless for you to try and deceive me, Miss Barrington," he replied, coldly. "I cannot have been mistaken in what I saw, and I shall be obliged by your understanding clearly that after your conduct, both in the lane the other day, and to-night, our engage-

ment must be at an end. Do not interrupt me, there can be no explanation to give. You are a clever actress, Miss Barrington, and you feign your sorrow as well as you did your love, but it is too late. There can never be anything between us now, so remember that you are free," and passing out of the conservatory he left her once more alone, and sinking into a chair she hid her face in her hands, and rooking herself to and fro, tried to restrain the tears which were falling fast.

"Vic, are you here?" said a cheery voice.

"Yes, Lance," she replied, quietly, "but I am so tired; do not ask me to dance any more."

He had entered the door, and was now standing by her side, and he saw that something was wrong with her, and, stooping down, took her hand.

"Little Vic, you are in trouble," he said, gently. "Do tell me what is the matter?"

"Don't ask me, there's a dear boy," she said, wearily; "but be sure you don't tell auntie I am not well."

"I won't if you would rather she did not know, dear; but Vic, do tell me what is your sorrow? Did not your lover come, old girl, for I never noticed you with one fellow more than with another."

"Yes, he came, Lance," and the tears began to fall again.

"Little Vic," he said, tenderly; "I can't bear to see you so upset. I fear you have quarrelled, dear. Tell me who he is, and let me bring him to you; he couldn't refuse to come, if he is worthy of the name of man!"

"Hush, Lance! do not talk so," she replied. "I will never ask him to come back, as we have parted for ever!"

"Tell me his name, dear, and let me set things right for you?"

"Never!" said Vic, firmly. "If anyone persuaded him to return to me I could not hold up my head again. I will receive no man's affection as a favour; so if he wishes to leave me let him."

"That is right, little woman," said Lancelot Silvester; "I am glad to see you have so much proper pride. And won't you let me know who this fellow is?"

"No, Lance; it could not do any good, and I would rather not tell you, so don't question me, there's a dear fellow."

"Very well, Vic, I won't bother you any more, and now come along into the ball-room, for auntie won't like it if you are not there to say adieu to her friends."

And he helped her up, and they passed into the ball-room together.

"Keep my secret, Lance," she whispered.

"Of course I will, Little Vic," he replied, quietly. "You need never be afraid to trust your cousin Lance," and he smiled down at her kindly, and Vic gave him a grateful look in return.

CHAPTER VI.

SORROW.

THE ball had been a perfect success, and all were satisfied and pleased. Many had for the first time felt the thrill of love enter their light young hearts, and had returned to their homes in a state of dreamy bewilderment, that they should ever have considered themselves happy before.

As for Marion Silvester and Felix Emmerson, nothing could have surpassed their joy; and when they parted for a few hours' rest, Felix had promised to go his father during the day, which had already dawned, and ask his consent to their engagement.

Vic, quite worn out with her exertions, and thoroughly weary in mind, went to her room as soon as she had seen her aunt comfortably in bed; and when alone, she sank upon her knees, to pray for the help she so much needed, to enable her to carry the cross bravely which had been given her to bear, and she arose with a calmer mind, and began to take

off the dress which had suited her so well, but now looked tumbled and disorderly.

"May I come in, dear?" said Marion, opening her door.

"Yes, do, old girl," replied Vic; "I am so glad to see you, as I wanted to tell you how delighted I feel that you and Mr. Emmerson seem so happy together. Marion, you accepted him to-night, did you not?"

"Yes, little Vic; Felix and I have promised to be true to each other, but I will only marry him on one condition."

"And what is that, dear?" asked Vic, looking up in surprise.

"That Sir Raphael receives me as a daughter willingly, and not as if he were going to make the best of a bad alliance."

"Why of course he will welcome you, Marion, and gladly, too, for who could help being fond of a good girl like you?" and she put her arms lovingly around her cousin's neck.

"I don't feel sure he will give his consent at all, Vic."

"Why, dear?"

"Because I have no money," she replied, a little bitterly.

Vic was silent for a few seconds, then she looked up brightly.

"Marion, dear, I am certain it will be all right, and I feel so glad you are happy, dear! Felix is a nice fellow, and I think he will prove worthy of you."

"I am sure he will," answered Marion, with a joyous smile. "And now, Vic, tell me how you and Philip got on. I never saw you dancing with him at all."

"Do not question me, dear," said Vic, sadly. "Phil and I have parted, and now let us talk of other things. I don't want to throw a shadow over your sunshine with my troubles."

"Oh, Vic! I am so sorry; but surely you will make it up again—lovers always do?"

"We shall be the exceptions, dear," replied Vic, trying to smile; "and if he can treat me in the cruel way he has done, I think I am better without him."

"Poor little woman!" said Marion, kindly.

"Was he cross because you were walking with Lance the other day?"

"Oh, no! It was not that altogether," replied Vic, the colour dyeing her pale, white cheeks. "I really think he did not like my dancing so much, but I was obliged to be civil to auntie's guests."

"Of course you were," said Marion; "but, Vic, I don't believe it has anything to do with you at all. I fancy he has been trying to win you for the sake of your fortune, and when you pretended you had none he no longer wanted you."

"Oh, don't say that, Marion!" replied Vic, the tears coming into her eyes once more; "let me at least have the satisfaction of feeling that he loved me once. He surely could not have acted it all so well!"

"I am sorry to pain you, darling!" said Marion Silvester, gently; "but I fear what I say is true, because Felix knows all about him, and told me to-night that he was a dreadful rascal, and most fearfully in debt, and this year took to betting a great deal, and when he lost he grew reckless, and went in for such heavy stakes that he had to borrow several hundreds of pounds to pay them off, for he continued losing; and at last, as his luck did not turn, he was obliged to give up, and Felix says the only wonder is that he has not bolted long ago."

"Oh, Marion," said Vic, getting paler than ever, "and I might have saved him had he only told me the truth; and perhaps he does love me after all, but thinking I am badly off he would not take me away from auntie, to share his poverty and his troubles."

"Vic, dear," replied Marion, gently, "put him out of your thoughts; he is not worthy of you in any way, he has never loved you, for Felix knows the girl he was engaged to, my poor child, and says he believes he really worshipped her."

Vic trembled like an aspen leaf; but she was determined to hear all.

"Marion," she said, "you tell me he he was engaged; then why did he not marry the woman he loved—why did he give her up?"

"She gave him up, dear, because he was untrue to her."

"What do you mean?" asked Vic, wearily. "I mean, little Vic, that Miss Mackenzie, for that is her name, came down to see him a short time ago, and finding him walking with you in a very lover-like fashion, she returned to town the same evening, and would have nothing more to do with him."

"Oh, Marion! how did Felix know all this? Perhaps he may be mistaken."

"Darling, there can be no doubt about it, for Felix is an intimate friend of the Mackenzie family, and Nora's father told him the whole story only last week, and says the girl is quite broken-hearted. Felix begged me not to tell you, but I told him I would see how things were going with you; and finding you had already parted, I thought it was better you should know the whole truth."

"Much better," replied Vic, sadly; "and so he never cared for me, Marion, and only wanted my money. I am glad you have been wise enough to keep nothing back from me; but I should like to ask you one question more. How could Felix tell I was the girl Miss Mackenzie saw Mr. Murray with?"

"He guessed you were, dear, because the old man said it was in the walk between the two grounds that she saw them together, and asked if I thought it could be you, and if so to try and warn you about him, and not to let you believe in him, but unfortunately he was too late with his advice."

"Yes, much too late," said Vic, quietly; "and now, dear Marion, go and rest; it is selfish of me to have kept you up so late. Where will your roses be?"

"Shall I stay with you, Vic?" asked her cousin gently, seeing how upset the poor girl looked.

"No, dear, thank you," replied Vic. "I would rather be alone, but I am none the less grateful for your kind thought of me," and giving each other a hearty embrace the two girls separated to take a few hours' repose.

"Oh! Phil! Phil!" moaned Vic, as soon as the door had closed, "you have broken my heart, and the thought that you have never loved me is the most cruel part of all to bear!" and undressing herself hastily she flung herself upon her bed, and, like a tired-out child, cried herself to sleep.

When the little party assembled at breakfast later in the morning, Lancelot Silvester found a letter on the table awaiting him, and he opened it with a joyous face, for it was from his fiancée, Kitty Hartland—the girl he thought more perfect than any other in the world.

They had been pattern lovers, and ever since their first acquaintance had never had a single misunderstanding, and when Mr. Hartland had refused his consent to their union until Lancelot should be better off, they had quietly made up their minds to wait, and both were for a time content.

They knew they would be unable to see much of each other, because Mr. Hartland had decided to send his daughter to Paris until she should be one-and-twenty. But he had not forbidden them to write, so they had corresponded regularly, each sending a letter once a week. And thus a year had passed, and Lancelot Silvester was still working hard in the hope of making a home worthy of his ideal woman, believing her to be as steadfast and true as himself.

He had noticed of late a different tone in her missives, which had perplexed him greatly, and he had written her an open, manly letter, asking her to explain the change, and this was her answer, and he welcomed it gladly, little dreaming of the news it would contain. And hurriedly breaking the seal he read it through, turning pale the while with pain and sup-

pressed passion. Then he perused it again, as if he could not realize the truth of its contents, and so engrossed was he that he never heard his cousin Vic enter the room; and she, seeing the care marks which had gathered on his brow, went at once to his side.

"Lance, dear! what is the matter?" she inquired gently. "Do tell me," she continued, as he tried to turn away from her, "and let me help you if I can."

"Kitty is untrue to me," he answered, with forced composure. "She has written to say she has accepted Lord Sedbourne, who has ten thousand a year."

"Oh! I am so grieved for you, dear," replied Vic, putting her hand confidently into his. "Lance, I know what you must suffer, and I more than sympathize with you," and making him sit down on the sofa she knelt beside him, and with great tenderness she tried to comfort him, and he grew calmer under her influence.

"Vic," he said, "I have lost all belief in human nature. I fancied Kitty perfect, and I find she is nothing but a heartless flirt! She has ruined my life; I shall in future take no interest in my work or anything else!"

"Yes, you will, by-and-by, Lance," said Vic, gently. "You are still young, dear, and you will find as years go on there are other things to live for. We each have our special duty to do, Lance, and you must rise above your sorrow and do it manfully. You will probably never forget Miss Hartland, but in time I hope you will cease to regret her; for, dear, if she could be so faithless to you, you are better without her."

"Vic, how can you speak in such a matter-of-fact manner? You can never have really loved, child, or you would not talk so lightly about getting over my affection for Kitty."

"Lance," she said, earnestly, "it would be impossible for you to care for Miss Hartland more than I do for my lost friend. I know you are miserable, and so am I. In fact, I long to die, and thus forget; but I am young, and strong too, and I know I have my life's duty before me, and with Heaven's help I mean to do it. Trouble must not make us selfish, dear boy. We must both rouse ourselves for the sake of others. Will you try, Lance?"

"Yes, little Vic! I will try, to please you. You are a perfect angel, dear, and have made me feel like a man once more! I will not think all the world bad for the fault of one."

"That is well, dear!" she replied, affectionately. "Gold has to be purified by fire, and the heart by sorrow. Trouble is sent to us in love, and if we will only receive it in the right way it must ennoble our natures."

"You are a good girl, Vic," said Lancelot Silvester, softly, "and you have been the saving of me. If I had not had you to lead me to the right path I should have become utterly reckless."

"Nonsense!" said Vic, smiling; "and now pull yourself together, dear, for there goes the breakfast-bell, and they will be coming down. No long faces, mind, or I shall be asked what is the matter with you. Let us try which of us can make ourselves the most agreeable during breakfast. You can't? Of course you can; the worse you feel the more you must talk, unless you wish to be catechized, which would not be quite pleasant for you."

"No, indeed, dear, I should be sorry if any one discovered my secret now. It is humiliating enough to feel that my love has been returned to me, not wanted; but it would make it far worse for me to bear if other people knew it."

"No doubt it would," replied Vic, "and to prevent anyone noticing things have gone wrong with you, you must appear your own cheerful self. I know it is difficult, but as you are to leave us to-morrow you will not have to keep up the farce for long, whereas I shall have to endure it to the end," and she rose from her knees, and left his side that he might not see the tears which had gathered in her eyes.

Then Miss Lawrence joined them, and soon afterwards Marion and Felix Emmerson entered the room, with their faces all aglow from the brisk walk they had had in the morning air.

Before the end of the day Felix Emmerson took his leave, promising to write and tell Marion what success he had with his father; and the next morning his letter arrived, but it brought little good news, for Sir Raphael had plainly told him at his death he would be penniless; and although he raised no objections to Marion Silvester personally, and consented to receive her as his son's future wife, still he pointed out to him how impossible it would be for them to marry until Felix had made a home and a fortune of his own; and Felix, knowing of no opening for him in England, determined to emigrate to Canada, and learn farming with some friends of his who had settled there, hoping to return home in a year's time, and buy a small estate with the little money he possessed (which had been left to him by his maternal grandfather) and settle down, and see to the management of it himself.

So it was arranged, and a month later all was ready for his departure, and he came to Bracondale to say good-bye.

And when he was gone Marion returned to her quiet life, pale and pathetic looking; yet she was not entirely unhappy, for she knew her lover was working for her, and she felt he would be true.

And Vic would always put her own trouble aside, and try to cheer her cousin, assuring her that better times would come; but she often felt lonely and restless herself, and longed for someone to comfort and support her.

And thus sorrow reigned where, but a few weeks before, all had seemed so bright and gay!

CHAPTER VII.

A BAD CHRISTMAS.

CHRISTMASTIDE came round, and Lancelot Silvester returned once more for a few days' holiday. But it was to be a sad season to all at Bracondale, for Miss Lawrence had taken a severe chill while visiting some cottagers, and after a few days' illness she passed away, being unable to survive a bad attack of congestion of the lungs. And her last words were full of love to the three who had nursed her with such unremitting attention; and then, with her hand clasped in Vic's, and a peaceful smile upon her lips, she entered into her eternal rest.

A week later the earthly remains of Miss Lawrence were conveyed to the little village church, about half-a-mile from Bracondale, and the whole distance the road was bordered on either side by those who loved and deeply mourned her.

The churchyard was crowded too, not by an expectant throng who had merely come together from the want of melancholy excitement, and who would go away as soon as the ceremony was over, speak of the beauty of the flowers, or the magnificence of the coffin, and after having exhausted their topic would return to their work without another thought of the one who had passed from their midst; but it was filled with those who were anxious to pay their last tribute of respect to their kind benefactress. And when her coffin was lowered into the grave there was not a dry eye among them.

Vic and Marion did not go to the funeral, feeling such painful scenes were not fit for women to witness; so they remained quietly at home, and read the sad, though beautiful service for the burial of the dead. And on the return of their guests the will was read, and, with the exception of a few legacies, it was found that the whole of Miss Lawrence's property was left to Victoria Barrington, making her the possessor of fifty thousand

pounds and the Bracondale estate. But little Vic felt no joy when she heard of her good fortune; for she had really loved her aunt, and she knew her life would be still darker without the dear old lady to comfort and cheer her.

So there was no flush of pleasure to be seen on her pale face, no sparkle in her usually bright eye; she simply took it as a matter of course, and her only feeling was one of deep regret that her kind relation had been taken from her.

And when their friends bade her good-bye, she failed to see the look of increased interest that many cast upon her, nor did she notice the lingering hand-clasp of those who longed to gain her favour.

The following morning, Marion Silvester received a letter from Felix Emmerson, telling her he had been seriously ill, and the doctors had ordered him home without delay. Therefore, he should leave Canada as soon as possible, and would arrive in England very shortly after his letter, and he promised to come and see her as soon as he landed, even before he went to his father's house.

Poor Marion was terribly upset at this news, for not only did it tell her of her lover's illness, but she knew it must put a stop to all chance of their settling for an indefinite period; and sitting down in an easy chair she wept as if her heart would break.

And thus Vic found her some time afterwards, and seeing she was thoroughly worn out, she persuaded her to go to bed for the remainder of the day; and after having banked up her fire, and made her comfortable, she darkened the room, and left her to take her much-needed rest; and going downstairs she despatched the footman with a telegram to Mr. Sharpie, their solicitor, begging him to come down to her that afternoon.

When he arrived, she insisted on his arranging a deed of gift of twenty-five thousand pounds for Marion Silvester; and after it was duly signed and witnessed she ran with light steps to Marion's chamber, and told her what she had settled for her, and that she hoped as soon as Felix came back that they would look for a pretty little nest and marry at once, as they had now nothing left to wait for.

Marion was quite overjoyed at this unexpected generosity on Vic's part, and quickly recovered her health and spirits; and when Felix Emmerson returned a week later, he received a bright and loving welcome from his fiancée, and it was soon decided that their wedding should be early in the spring; and after a few days' stay at Bracondale he went to pay a visit to his father, and look for a suitable residence for himself and Marion.

A week after, when Vic was standing by her aunt's grave, a young servant maid ran up to her in great distress, and told her her mistress had fainted, and she could not bring her round, and Vic accompanied her to where the girl was lying in a senseless heap upon the ground, and after inquiring about her for a few minutes she learnt it was Nora MacKenzie, and that she had lately lost her father, and the shock had been too much for her, and that she was now alone in the world. And Vic's kind heart was touched by the sad story, and she sent for a fly from some stables near, and drove her straight to Bracondale, and sent for Dr. Hammond, who said it was the beginning of a severe attack of brain fever, and advised Vic to send her home without delay; but Vic, knowing her history, determined to keep her at Bracondale, and she telegraphed for a trained nurse to wait on her at night, while she and Marion attended to her by day, and for a long time she lingered between life and death, and in her delirium she called incessantly for Philip Murray, and she seemed so distressed about him that the doctor said if she did not see him she would die, as nothing else would save her. And Vic nobly set her own feelings aside, and said she would send for him, for Nora's sake, and she begged her cousin

Lancelot Silvester to inquire as to his whereabouts as soon as possible.

He quickly learnt that Philip Murray had disappeared to get away from his creditors, who refused to wait any longer for their money; and Vic, remembering Dr. Hammond's words, determined to send for him still, so she persuaded Lancelot to find out the exact amount he owed to everyone, and then she paid his debts, and made him free to return to England; and having insisted on Mrs. Murray giving up her son's address, Lancelot Silvester telegraphed to Philip to come at once to Bracondale, also saying that Nora was dying, and that his money affairs were all settled.

Vic thanked him in her own sweet way, and then confessed to him how greatly she had loved Philip; but he had proved he was unworthy of her affection, and that she no longer cared for him; and Lancelot gave her a warm kiss, and after a few loving words, left her to return to his work in London.

CHAPTER VIII.

A NOBLE FORGIVENESS.

WHEN Philip Murray received Lancelot Silvester's telegram his astonishment knew no bounds. His first idea was that someone had played a trick upon him; but on reflection he remembered that no one knew his address but his mother and sister, and he felt sure neither of them would give it up without a good reason. So he packed his portmanteau quickly, and hastened down to the steamer which would take him to Gravesend in a few hours.

For the last month he had been hiding in Boulogne, and had intended to proceed from there to New Guinea, where he had some friends, as soon as a suitable opportunity offered itself; and he was living upon what Mrs. Murray could spare him out of her income, which was anything but large, and although she did all she was able to do for him, he felt it was not in her power to pay his debts.

He asked himself again and again who could have been so generous towards him? And each time the question puzzled him more and more; for as far as he knew he had not a friend in the world, and Nora being at Bracondale was the greatest wonder of all to him.

He knew that her father was dead, for he had seen it announced in the paper, and he had written a letter of condolence to Nora; but he had expected no answer, as he had not told her where he was staying, feeling sure she would not write to him if she knew his address.

At last the journey was over, and he was waiting in Vic's spacious drawing-room, feeling anything but comfortable. He had hitherto been thinking chiefly of Nora, for the telegram had stated that she was dying, but now that he was once more at Bracondale the thought of meeting Vic made him feel ill-at-ease, for he knew that he had behaved disgracefully to her, and although he believed that she had been flirting with her cousin at the very time she was engaged to him, still his conscience whispered that was no excuse for his conduct.

But here his meditations were disturbed by the appearance of Marion Silvester, who entered the room with a grave, dignified manner, bowing slightly to Philip as his only welcome.

"How is Nora?" he asked, with evident nervousness.

"She is still dangerously ill," replied Marion, "but fortunately you have come in time to see her, and I will take you to her at once," and opening the door she led the way in silence.

On the first landing she stopped at the door of Nora's room, and having let him pass in she closed it, and went away leaving him there.

"Poor little Vic!" she said, half aloud, "this is indeed a trial for her."

As soon as Philip Murray entered the apartment he heard the voice of the woman he loved calling wildly upon his name, and in another second he was by her side, clasping her in his strong arms.

"Nora! Nora! my darling!" he pleaded; "do speak to me! I have come back. Oh! give me one word of welcome, or my heart will break!" and stooping down he rained kisses upon her pure white brow; then leaning her head upon his breast he tried to soothe her, and after a while she became calmer, although she continued perfectly insensible.

Vic had watched by the sick girl's side until she had heard her former lover ascend the stairs, then she had slipped into the room adjoining Nora's, and falling upon her knees she prayed to be enabled to forgive, as we all hope to be forgiven; and when she had ended her prayer she arose, and waited until it was time to give the patient her medicine, then she returned with trembling limbs and a blanched cheek to the sick room, but calm as ever.

When Philip Murray saw her he coloured nervously, and started to his feet.

"I am sorry to disturb you," said Vic quietly, "but Nora must have her cooling draught, it is so necessary for her," and having poured the mixture into a glass, she leaned over the senseless girl, and gently made her swallow it.

"You make a good nurse, Miss Barrington," said Philip, "and if Nora lives she will owe her life to you."

"I have only done my share," replied Vic, trying to smile. "Marion and I take it by turns to watch her during the day, and we have an experienced trained nurse to remain with her at night."

"How kind of you!" said Philip, with genuine feeling, "and it is good indeed of your aunt to allow Nora to stay here."

"My poor dear aunt is dead," answered Vic, with tears starting to her eyes.

"Miss Lawrence dead?" said Philip in surprise; "then was it you who sent for me?"

"Yes, Mr. Murray," answered Vic, quietly. "I sent for you, as Dr. Hammond said it was the only chance of saving that poor girl's life."

"Miss Barrington, how can I ever thank you?" said Philip, with emotion. "But, tell me, who was it that paid my debts for me, and thus enabled me to return to England a free man? Vic I believe it was you!" he continued, as he saw her turn away without answering his question, and going to her side he took her hand in his. "Vic, Vic! what a noble girl you are!" he said, fervently, "and how cruelly I have wronged you. Can you ever forgive me for all I have made you suffer?"

"Yes Philip, I forgive you!" she replied, with trembling voice, "and I hope you may yet be happy."

"Vic, before you speak to me like that, I must confess all to you. Perhaps you know that I took to betting this year; I did it, hoping to gain money, to enable me to furnish a house, and then settle down; but ill-luck constantly followed me, and I continually lost. Then I had to borrow, and Langley insisted on a good security; and so, Vic, having been told you were Miss Lawrence's heiress, I said I was engaged to you, and that Miss Lawrence had consented to my giving a security on the part of her property, upon which the White Lodge is built, and said she was going to give that to us as a wedding present. So he gave me a deed to take to her to sign, and having a letter of hers in my possession, I forged her signature, and the signatures of two witnesses to the document. Then I took it back to him, and he was satisfied, and lent me the money I wanted."

"After obtaining it, I came to you, Vic, and told you I loved you, and asked you to be my wife; but, child, much as I liked you, I had

no heart to give you, as that was already Nora's. And then I heard that you were not rich as I had supposed, and I left you with the first excuse I could find. But I had my punishment, Vic; for that dear girl, to whom you have been so kind, would have no more to do with me, being aware of my conduct. Although I went to her again and again after my quarrel with you, and entreated her to take me back, she would not listen to me; and my affairs being desperate I escaped from my creditors to Boulogne, where I have been hiding for the last month, waiting for a chance to get away from home altogether. But, thanks to your goodness, I am now free from debt once more; though, until I know you fully forgive me, I shall be most miserable."

"Mr. Langley told my cousin about the security," said Vic, quietly, "and I could not understand it."

"And you sent for me after that?" said Philip, in amazement.

"Yes," replied Vic. "The knowledge of your wrong-doing did not make any difference in my wish to save Nora's life; so I told Mr. Silvester to telegraph for you at once."

"Vic, for the love of Heaven, forgive me, or I shall never hold up my head again!"

"I have already told you that I forgive you," replied Vic, gently; "and if it is considered necessary for you to remain here on Nora's account, I will make you welcome."

"Is Bracondale yours, Vic?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Because I understood my sister you told her you were not Miss Lawrence's heiress."

"I told her what I did, Mr. Murray, because I had learnt to fear it was my money you wanted, and not me, so I pretended to be poor, in order to prove you; but it is all over now, and I do not wish to refer to the past again. Be a better man in future, Mr. Murray, and I shall consider myself well repaid for any small service I have rendered you."

"Heaven bless you, Vic," he answered, earnestly. "You have indeed forgiven me nobly, and acted generously, and I will begin a new life from to-day."

And after a few more words of gentle advice, she left him alone with the woman he loved.

CHAPTER IX.

A HAPPY CONCLUSION.

NORA MACKENZIE slowly but surely recovered, and after all danger had passed for her, Philip Murray left Bracondale, and went to see his former employer, and begged him to take him back; and at last the old man consented to do so, and he returned to his work once more. And his master, seeing how greatly improved he was, did his best to help him on, having known him from boyhood, and having always been fond of him.

For a long time Nora would take no notice of Philip, when her consciousness returned—in fact, his presence seemed to annoy her; but little Vic, with her gentle words, at length made peace between them, and when happiness once more returned to her, her progress towards recovery was rapid; and so grateful was she to Vic that she could not bear her out of her sight.

In April, Felix Emmerson and Marion were married quietly in London, and went away to Switzerland, where they intended to remain three months, and then return and settle down, as by that time their new house would be ready for them.

Vic had decided she could not keep up all the Bracondale estate upon her diminished income, and had given Marion half the land on condition she built her nest there, laughingly telling her she did so for her own convenience, as when she became "a stupid old maid" she should want her near at hand, to take care of her. And thus the matter was settled; and after the wedding, Lance and Vic went to see the bride and bridegroom off at

the station, and watching their bright, contented faces, they felt certain a life of happiness was before them.

"Vic," said Lance, when they found themselves the sole occupants of a first-class carriage, on their return journey; "seeing other people's happiness has made me long for a little sunshine myself. You know my past history, dear girl, and if you can forget that, and accept my love, I am sure we could be very happy together."

Vic blushed bewitchingly, but for a minute did not answer, feeling too glad for words.

"My little Vic, cannot you care for me just a wee bit?" asked Lancelot, pleadingly.

"Yes, Lance!" she replied, with a joyous smile. "I love you truly, and I am more than glad you think me worthy of your affection, knowing how much I have loved another."

"We are quits on that score, Vic," laughed Lance, taking her in his arms, and kissing her fondly "and I, for one, am thankful things took the turn they did, for my Vic is the true gold, whereas Miss Hartland's love was only a worthless imitation; she has already quarrelled with her husband, and he has left her."

"Perhaps she may not have been to blame for that," said Vic, quietly.

"I think she was, dear, for report says she was so fearfully fast; he could not put up with her any longer."

"I hope she shall never part, dearest!" said Vic, gently.

"I am certain we never shall, darling!" answered Lance, brightly, "and now, sweetheart, how long are you going to keep me waiting? When can I claim you, love, for my own little wife?"

"In about a year, Lance," replied Vic, shyly. "Will that do?"

"Certainly not, you saucy girl! Three months is the outside I can wait!" laughed Lance.

And after some persuasion, Vic consented that their marriage should take place as soon as Marion and Felix returned home.

Philip Murray took a pretty little cottage just out of London, which he furnished simply, but nicely, and as soon as Nora was well enough she was transplanted to her new home, and she soon regained her spirits and her beauty, under the influence of her husband's love and unceasing devotion; for he had kept his promise to little Vic, and had indeed turned over a new leaf, and was soon both liked and respected by all who knew him.

Late in July the travellers returned, finding their house quite ready for them, all prettily arranged under Vic's directions; she having presented them with all their furniture as her wedding gift; and a month after Lancelot Silvester claimed the fulfilment of his cousin's promise, and they were quietly married in their own village church, and settled down at once at Bracondale, where they decided to live; and as years rolled on neither Vic nor her husband ever regretted their past loves, and each season made them more contented and happy.

[THE END.]

THE death has recently occurred of James Nicholson, the last survivor of the storm-beaten passengers of the *Forfarshire* who were rescued by Grace Darling. He never forgot that awful night when, as he and all in the rigging thought, an angel with long, yellow hair flowing in the wind appeared, pulling vigorously to their ship's side through the storm and drift; but he very rarely spoke of it. He, however, had had enough of the sea, and for twenty-six years afterwards he drove a locomotive on the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway. He was seventy-one years of age, and in the employment of an oil company when he died.

FACETIZE.

JOK: "I constantly stumble upon a discussion about idiocy and idiots. Are idiots really human beings?" Jack: "Certainly; just as much as you and I."

"Don't be a fool!" she said, with a snap, to her husband. "Why didn't you tell me that when I asked you to marry me?" he replied, and a silence fell upon that house.

WATERSIDE MOTHER: "Rosaliad, you should not stay out in the cold; you will get chapped." "Well, that's what I go out for, ain't it?" "For what, dear?" "Chaps."

SHE: "Do you find writing poetry remunerative, Mr. Sissy?" HE: "O yes, fairly so. But I don't depend upon poetry altogether." SHE: "No?" HE: "O no, I'm a salesman in a Yorkshire ribbon warehouse."

A LADY once remarked to the elder Booth, who had a broken nose: "I like your acting, Mr. Booth; but, to be frank with you, I can't get over your nose." "No wonder, madam," responded he—"the bridge is gone!"

THERE are two things in this world that we could not understand. One is that you catch a cold without trying; that if you let it run on, it stays with you, and if you stop it, it goes away.

CONVALESCENT (to doctor): "Now that I am on the road to recovery, doctor, I think you may as well send in your bill." Physician: "Not yet, sir. I want to avoid any risk of a relapse."

HE: "Aw, excuse me! 'Pon my word! I was absent-minded. Fanny! Can you account for this utter absence of mind in me?" SHE: "No, sir, I cannot. I recognise the fact, and ask no questions!"

MISS LIONFINDER (at the ball of the diplomatic corps): "Those Heidelberg duels must be very exciting, Lieutenant. I see you bear one of the scars." Lieutenant Girsh: "I was flattered, Miss Lionfinder, but I got that from my—vot you call him?—Gonsorial surgeon, dis morning."

"I had no idea Sharker had so many friends in the club as he seems to have. Why, everyone looks quite down in the mouth since he went abroad." "No wonder. He forgot to make any announcement of his departure, you know, and he carried his cheque-book with him."

WIFE: "John, what do you think of the new cook?" Husband: "Excellent, my dear—excellent! I never enjoyed a better meal than my dinner to-day. Where did you ever manage to find such a remarkable good-looking young woman, anyway?" In just five minutes by the watch the cook was informed that she might find another place.

WIFE: "Great heavens, Cranston! Don't deny it; I saw you kiss her!" Husband (stiffly): "You are mistaken. She kissed me." Wife: "But why did you let her?" Husband: "I couldn't be rude to a lady." Wife: "But why did she want to kiss you?" Husband: "I can't imagine. You ought to know."

YOUNG HUSBAND: "It does seem to me you might learn how to cook better than that; my mother—" Young Wife: "There, that will do; I refrain from learning how to cook on principle." "Oh, you do; thinking of me, of course?" "No; of my son!" "Son?" "Yes; I don't intend he shall ever make any nice girls miserable bragging about my cooking."

BACK-ACTION ENTERTAINMENT. — Young Clammy (with a tremendous idea of his conversational powers): "My mother will be down in a few moments, Miss Keene. Cawn't I entertain you until she comes?" Miss Keene: "How good of you, Mr. Clammy! Will you be kind enough to watch my coachman out of the window and see that he keeps his cape buttoned up tightly? The poor fellow is so delicate, you know."

SOCIETY.

THE QUEEN will present to the Pope, on the occasion of the approaching Pontifical jubilee, a rare and richly-bound edition of the "Vulgate." His Holiness gives to Her Majesty, as a return jubilee offering, a superb mosaic.

THE DUKE OF CAMBRIDGE has accepted the invitation of Lord Bateman to meet the representatives of the Colonial conference, Her Majesty's ministers, the Agents-General for the Colonies, and a distinguished party at a banquet at the St. George's Club, Hanover-square, on Wednesday, April 20.

THE DUCHESS OF ALBANY has returned to Esher. Her Royal Highness was to have awaited the Queen's arrival at Cannes; but Her Majesty having decided that her daughter-in-law's presence at the memorial service is indispensable, she has returned home. The Duchess goes early next month, with her children, to Germany, to visit her parents, the Prince and Princess of Waldeck-Pyrmont at Arolsen.

THE STROLLING PLAYERS gave a successful invitation theatrical performance on Tuesday evening at St. George's Hall. Mr. Sidney Grundy's four-act comedy "The Glass of Fashion" was the piece presented, the principal parts being taken by Mrs. O'Hagan, Miss M. Catterson-Smith, Miss Amy Holden, Mr. Charles Lamb, Capt. A. FitzGeorge, R.N., Mr. James Meade, Mr. J. Humphreys Parry, Mr. E. H. Clark, and Messrs. Krohn and Routledge. The dresses worn by Mrs. O'Hagan were artistic *chef d'œuvre*, both as regards the beauty of the fabrics and the elegance of their style.

In the first act she appeared in a white dinner dress of silk and lace, cut square, and sleeveless, with rich white bows on shoulder and skirt. In the second act she wore a white tea gown of Liberty silk and lace; in the third act an eccentric-looking visiting costume made of a large patterned tan and white silk, with tan gloves and an elegant hat trimmed high behind with white and tan ribbons.

In the fourth act she wore a handsome morning costume of steel-grey, with watered silk sash of lighter shade. Miss Catterson-Smith's gowns were also noticeable, the first being an evening dress of pink silk and lace, the second a grey cashmere with revers to bodice and white waistcoat; the third a grey velvet walking costume laced up behind, with hat and feathers to match; and the fourth an embroidered white cambric muslin.

Miss Holden's toilettes were also admired, particularly a handsome costume of bronze-green plush draped with deep ecrû lace. The acting generally was good, Capt. FitzGeorge and Mr. Lamb displaying all the finish of practised actors, Mr. Meade and Mr. J. H. Parry worthily supporting them, and Mrs. O'Hagan, Miss Smith, and Miss Holden doing full justice to their parts. An excellent selection of music was played during the evening.

QUEEN ELIZABETH OF ROMANIA devoted such a large amount of time to singing that her attendants lately assured her that her voice entitled her to rank with the most celebrated of singers. The flattery bore fruit, for the queen began to ask herself if these rare vocal gifts ought not to be dedicated to her people. She determined first to have the unbiased opinion of a musical critic, and so went incognito to the French professor, Damaouis, and sang before him in Bucharest. The professor told the queen to run over the scales, and then to sing a song and an opera aria. Then, turning to her he said seriously, "You have no voice at all, though plenty of musical feeling and excellent phrasing. I would train you for the operetta, but that, to be sincere, you have not the right face!" The queen handed the professor several gold pieces with her card, buying before she left a dozen opera airs for private study.

STATISTICS.

THE HUMAN FAMILY.—The human family living to-day on earth consists of about one billion, four hundred and fifty million individuals; not less, probably more. These are distributed over the earth's surface, so that now there is no considerable part where man is not found. In Asia, where he was first planted, there are now approximately about eight hundred million, densely crowded; on an average one hundred and twenty to the square mile. In Europe there are three hundred and twenty million, averaging one hundred to the square mile, not so crowded, but everywhere dense, and at points over-populated. In Africa there are two hundred and ten million. In America, North and South, there are one hundred and ten million, relatively thinly scattered and recent. In the islands, large and small, probably ten million. The extremes of the white and black are as five to three; the remaining seven hundred million intermediate brown and tawny. Of the race, five hundred million are well-clothed—that is, wear garments of some kind to cover their nakedness; seven hundred million are semi-clothed, covering inferior parts of the body; two hundred and fifty million are practically naked. Of the race, five hundred million live in houses partly furnished with the appointments of civilization; seven hundred million in huts or caves with no furnishings; two hundred and sixty million have nothing that can be called a home, are barbarous and savage. The range is from the topmost round—the Anglo-Saxon civilization, which is the highest known—down to naked savagery. The portion of the race lying below the line of human condition is at the very least three-fifths of the whole, or nine hundred million.

GEMS.

MADNESS has more followers than discretion. No pleasure is comparable to the standing upon the vantage ground of truth.

He who has not a good memory should never take upon him the trade of lying.

He that would relish success to purpose should keep his passions cool and his expectations low.

One clear and distinct idea is worth a world of misty ones. Gain one clear, distinct truth, and it becomes a centre of light.

It is books that teach us to define our pleasures when young, and which, having so taught us, enable us to recall them with satisfaction when old.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

BROILED SALT FISH.—Soak a thick piece over night. Wipe dry and broil, then butter and serve hot.

POTATO DUMPLINGS.—Form cold mashed potatoes into small mounds by pressing them into a small-sized cup. Place on the top of each a bit of butter, and bake until hot all through and well-browned.

BROWN BREAD BROWN.—Break up one pint of dry brown bread into small pieces. Mix with one-fourth cup butter in a double boiler, add milk sufficient to cover, and cook over hot water without stirring it till the bread has absorbed all the milk. Eat with milk or cream.

GRAHAM GEMS.—Two cups of Graham flour, one-half teaspoonful of salt, one tablespoonful of sugar, two eggs, whites and yolks beaten separately, one cup of milk, one cup of water. Mix the flour, salt, and sugar. Add milk to the beaten yolks, then the water, and stir this into the dry mixture. Add the whites beaten stiff, and bake in hot gem-pans about half an hour.

MISCELLANEOUS.

CONSCIENCE is justice's best minister. It threatens, promises, rewards, and punishes, and keeps all under its control; the busy must attend to its remonstrances, the most powerful submit to its reproof, and the angry endure its upbraidings. While conscience is our friend, all is peace; but, if once offended, farewell the tranquil mind!

A CHARMING FABRIC.—We have received several samples of a beautiful material for dresses which seems to be an adequate substitute for velvet. It is called the "Lonie Velvet." We have submitted it to several lady friends who pronounce the shades to be exquisite and the substance all that can be desired as regards the promise of durability.

THERE are no more vicious habits than adopting measures to "keep awake" or employing artifices—or, still worse, resorting to drugs and other devices—to induce or prolong sleep. Dozing is the very demoralization of the sleep function, and from this pernicious habit arises much of the so-called sleeplessness—more accurately wakefulness—from which multitudes suffer.

THE best part of health is fine disposition. It is more essential than talent even in the works of talent. Nothing will supply the want of sunshine to peaches, and to make knowledge valuable you must have the cheerfulness of wisdom. Whenever you are sincerely pleased you are nourished. The joy of the spirit indicates its strength. All healthy things are sweet tempered.

THE POWER OF TRUTH.—Truth makes a coward bold, while there is no cowardice so great as that found in the want of it. Self-respect and moral dignity go by the board when we condescend to a lie, either spoken or acted, either by suggestion of the false or suppression of the truth. Whatever it may be that we are called on to testify or acknowledge we should stand to openly and without wincing.

NOTHING is more humanizing and elevating than the love of flowers and trees. Ridicule it as some men may, there is profit in what they call mere sentiment. When the trees which bear luscious fruit cease to be beautiful, and when nature becomes baldly utilitarian and too miserly for the production of anything but sordid necessities, then may man follow. He may shut his eyes to beauty and his ears to melody.

As one seeking health does not inquire what degree of intensity in heat or cold he can possibly endure and live, but rather seeks for the most favourable climate in which his physical functions can do their best work, so in choosing life-employment men should inquire, not what branch they can possibly push themselves into by straining every nerve, but in which one they can do the best work and develop their powers in the best manner.

THERE is an excellent opportunity for women in architecture. There are a few women, it is true, engaged in the offices of architects; but the proportion, when considered in relation to the numbers employed in the other professions, as well as sciences, is small. One architect has been known to declare that he employed a woman assistant because she offered suggestions of such feasibility and practicability as no man could offer.

THERE are some cases of necessity which require that unpleasant things should be written. In such instances, however confidential, they should be such as the writer is ready to verify, if occasion arise. Letters should be even more reserved than conversation in their statements. In talking, one can explain, modify, or even recall a declaration, if need be. But the written letter remains, with no interpreter at hand with explanation or qualifying notes.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

B. D. H.—January 2, 1886, fell on Tuesday.
 J. C.—Your writing is very good indeed.
 JOE RAPPA.—We cannot give addresses of theatrical agencies.
 B. J. J.—You will probably find one advertised in the daily papers.
 CONSTANT READER.—Prepare chalk is one of the best dentifrices.
 THOMAS W.—Your handwriting is too uneven in its character.
 T. TLT.—We cannot account for the enlargement of the nose of which you complain.
 B. E.—It is not proper to pick your teeth or put your hand in your mouth while eating.
 MARY W.—In the study of etiquette much must be learned by observation, but much more is learned by practice.
 E. E. S.—It might be objectionable to one afflicted with such a mark; therefore it should not be spoken of in society or elsewhere.
 D. D. DUBAR.—The President of Mexico, Manuel Gonzalez, was elected for four years from December 1, 1880.
 WALTER W.—Smoking is very injurious to a boy of seventeen. He should avoid stimulants of every kind.
 N. F. F.—You are right and your friend is wrong. The sun is really nearer the earth in winter than in summer, but the rays falling upon the earth obliquely in winter convey less warmth.
 E. G. R.—We certainly should consider it a kindness for any friend, whether gentleman or lady, to inform us of anything that they might observe that was amiss in the arrangement of our toilet.
 W. W.—The name of the town may be abbreviated as you write it, but it is a rather slovenly thing to abbreviate except in a rapid business note, and the names of cities are seldom abbreviated.
 L. S. D.—It will not matter that you are the same age as the man you wish to marry. It would be better if you were four or five years younger than he, but it is not material.
 KITTY WILD.—It would not be considered an insult to any person with the least bit of common sense to be told that the powder on her face showed very plainly; but rather an indication of your true friendship for her.
 BESSIE.—You are a very good height, and have probably attained your full growth. You are a blonde from your description. The hair enclosed is pale-gold. Your writing indicates an amiable, well-balanced nature, but somewhat impulsive.
 E. G. J.—First cousins are persons who, not being related as brothers or sisters, yet had the same grandparent. Second cousins had the same great-grandparent, and third cousins the same great-great-grandparent.
 E. S. S.—It is not etiquette to pass forward to another the dish that has been handed to you, unless requested to do so; it may have been purposely designed for you, and passing it to another may give him or her what is not wanted.
 P. T. E.—The sentence given should be "Five thousand pounds was the sum paid for the house." Five thousand pounds is taken as a phrase corresponding with that sum, and should have a verb in the singular. It is equivalent to price.
 SIS.—Parties newly introduced should merely bow, unless they are in a manner "old acquaintances" through correspondence or often hearing of each other through mutual friends. A lady may dance with a gentleman just introduced to her. She should be more particular about accepting an invitation to ride.
 WANDERING SAM.—For a grandparent, uncle, or aunt, six months would be as long as fashion would require you to wear mourning. It is not necessary that you should wear gloves for the above mentioned relatives. It is not required that you should remain away from all places of amusement unless you feel so inclined.
 E. N. G.—The only ground upon which the legislature could interfere in the matter would be that the presence of the bodies of the dead was prejudicial to the health of the city. It is very unlikely that any such action will ever be taken, and it is probable that the dead are as likely to remain undisturbed in the churchyard as in any cemetery in the country.
 H. R. A.—Although a large number of doctors denounce the use of corsets even by women, still very few would wish to abolish them all at once, for sickly and delicate women undoubtedly feel the want of their accustomed support very seriously. In the same way a very effeminate and delicate man might actually find corsets to contribute to his comfort, but his wiser course would be to endeavour to strengthen his feeble body by temperate eating and drinking and moderate exercise. Any real improvement which has taken place in your health is probably due to the change you have made in your habits at table, and the sooner you throw aside your corsets the better it will be for you.

A. E. E.—We do not know anything about this company and cannot recommend it.
 L. B.—Your writing indicates natural intelligence and an amiable, even disposition. The spelling is incorrect. The hair is a shade of brown.
 B. S. K.—We cannot give any recipe or directions for the use of arsenic as a cosmetic or beautifier. It is a deadly poison.
 P. O.—Your writing, spelling, and construction of sentences reflect credit on the grammar-school of which you are a graduate.
 E. J. W.—In sending invitations to a wedding or party to a family with unmarried daughters, there is no need of separate cards for the daughters. Address envelope "Mr. and Mrs. Blank and family."
 FRED.—Unless engaged to be married a young lady has a perfect right to attend the theatre or other places of amusement with other gentlemen acquaintances, if properly chaperoned.
 E. T. T.—Your demt-blond style of brown hair, dark-blue eyes and rosy complexion would enable you to wear almost any colour. For street-dress golden-brown, or bronze-green, or navy-blue. For evening wear pink, pale lilac, mauve or blue.
 E. N.—The exchange of valentines is quite customary, but a lady or gentleman need not think that because they receive such marks of esteem that it is obligatory upon them to reciprocate the honour. Usually, however, a mutual interchange is made among intimate friends.
 W. W. H.—Arsenic is a deadly poison, and as a matter of course deleterious efforts will be sure to follow the use of arsenical compounds, no matter how infinitesimal it may be associated with other ingre-dients. When given under the advice of your family physician the case assumes a different phase.

THE WAY OF IT.

This is the way of it, wide world over:
 One is beloved, and one is the lover;
 One gives, and the other receives.
 One lavishes all in a wild emotion;
 One offers a smile for a life's devotion;
 One hopes, and the other believes.
 One lies awake in the night to weep,
 And the other drifts into a sweet sound sleep.
 One soul is aflame with a god-like passion,
 One plays with love in an idler's fashion;
 One speaks, and the other hears.
 One sobs "I love you," and wet eyes show it,
 And one laughs lightly and says, "I know it."
 With smiles for the other's tears.
 One lives for the other and nothing beside,
 And the other remembers the world is wide.
 This is the way of it, sad earth over:
 The heart that breaks is the heart of the lover,
 And the other learns to forget.
 For what is the use of endless sorrow?
 Though the sun goes down, it will rise to-morrow,
 And life is not over yet.
 Oh! I know this truth, if I know no other.
 That Passionate Love is Pain's own mother.

E. W.

W. D. W.—Ouida is pronounced "Wida." You are a blonde. The hair enclosed is golden-brown. A person may cut wisdom teeth at fifteen. Your writing is very legible, letters well-shaped but not smooth. You will write well with some practice.

JENNY.—If you have received an invitation to attend a wedding, and are unable to attend, you should send a regret with a present to the bride; and if she has weekly receptions at her home after she returns from her wedding tour you must call if you desire to be considered among her friends.

C. C. V.—It is possible to remove superfluous hair permanently, by inserting a fine needle between each hair, and then passing an electric spark through the needle, but although the operation is described as giving very little pain, as being effective, it has not come extensively into use so far, being extremely expensive.

G. M.—In order to put your property beyond the reach of your son-in-law you will have to make a will; and in order to make such a will as would insure the carrying out of your wishes, you will have to consult a lawyer of much experience in that branch of his profession. As you say your health is precarious, you should attend to the matter at once. Go to some lawyer of good reputation, tell him just what you want, and leave him to devise the means of carrying out your desire in the matter.

S. S.—The Insurrection of the Jacquerie is the name given to the war of the French peasantry, which broke out in 1358. The immediate occasion of it was the enormities perpetrated by Charles the B.d. King of Navarre, and his adherents; but it was really caused by long-continued oppression on the part of the nobles. Suddenly rising against their lords, the peasants laid hundreds of castles in ruins, murdered the nobles and practised every enormity—acting, as they said, on the principle of doing as has been done to them. For some weeks they were successful, but at last the magnitude of the danger induced the nobles to make common cause against them; and on June 9, 1358, the peasants were defeated with great slaughter, near Meaux, by Captain de Buch and Count of Flanders, which put an end to the insurrection.

GREEK ALICE.—Any chemist will give you the proportion. It is ordinary quinine.

DUKE WHIGGLES.—You might have chosen a more sensible *nom de plume*. You write very well indeed.

FRITZ.—We advise you to remain where you are until you have saved some money.

F. A. K.—Do not interfere. The nostrums sold for the purpose are generally injurious. We cannot recommend any.

D. D. C.—A good varnish for maps and pictures is made of Canada balsam and rectified oil of turpentine in equal parts, mixed. Set the bottle containing the mixture in warm water and agitate until the solution is perfect. Then set in a warm place to set in, and when settled pour off the clear varnish for use.

B. D.—A gentleman seldom wears more than one ring—a cameo or seal ring on the little finger of the left hand or the finger next it. A gentleman may wear gloves in summer without seeming effeminate. If he is a physician, a musician, or an artist, he should keep his hands from roughening contact, so as not to lose delicacy of touch.

D. R.—Music written by Sullivan, Balfe, or Audran is very popular among the music-loving public. There are also numerous ballads set to catching music, which are much admired by the majority of people. The works of no special composer are what might be strictly termed fashionable, although at the present day comic opera holds a high position.

S. H. R.—It is now difficult to acquire the rudiments of Hebrew than those of Latin or Greek, but it would be possible to attain to a knowledge of Hebrew, which would entitle its possessor to a respectable place among scholars, in less time than would be needed to secure a similar knowledge of Greek or Latin. The reason of this is that the range of Hebrew literature is comparatively small.

B. D. R.—You should study several elementary school grammars and rhetorics carefully, not following any one of them implicitly, but comparing them where they differ, and if you are fortunate enough to have some frank friend a little better educated than yourself, who will undertake to note and correct your faults in speaking and writing, you will improve more quickly under such tuition than by any amount of unassisted study.

E. L. L.—Ask the young lady, as soon as possible, whether she loves you well enough to promise to wait for you until you are in a position to marry her, and whether she will accept and wear a ring as a token of your engagement. If she says "yes," and allows you to put the ring on her hand, and if then you have no emotions the expression of which will make an appropriate speech for the occasion, there would be no use in anyone's trying to teach you what to say.

W. K.—In choosing a trade or profession a young man should be governed by his natural aptitude for any particular thing. The time required for learning one depends upon the study and attention given to it. To be a civil engineer requires a natural talent and a course of instruction in what pertains to the business. One wishing to be a physician should have a leaning that way. He may study anatomy, chemistry, &c., under a physician as a preparation, and then take a course or two of lectures in a medical college.

M. D. W.—You did wrong to repeat to your lover the unpleasant remark made of him by your sister. If he was proud and sensitive he has no doubt brooded over it; and it was natural he should while smoldering under the hurt, write as he did. The fact that you cherished the remark in your memory and thought so little of his feelings as to repeat it to him made him feel sore against you. Write and ask him to come to see you, and then pass it off as lightly as you can and be gentle and sweeter to him than before.

G. B.—It is impossible to answer your questions without knowing more of the circumstances than can be gathered from your letter. As a rule, one should be very careful not to appear to ask for invitations but if for any reason you should wish to do so, it is better to ask boldly for what you want rather than to do or say anything which would look like "fawning for an invitation." In this case if you can give the lady an opportunity of withdrawing the invitation you should do so.

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NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

B. D. H.—January 2, 1886, fell on Tuesday.
 J. C.—Your writing is very good indeed.
 JOE RAPPAS.—We cannot give addresses of theatrical agencies.
 B. J. J.—You will probably find one advertised in the daily papers.
 CONSTANT READER.—Prepared chalk is one of the best dentifrices.
 THOMAS W.—Your handwriting is too uneven in its character.
 T. TILT.—We cannot account for the enlargement of the nose of which you complain.
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For Writing, Etching, or Drawing on Linen,
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From SYMES & Co., Pharmaceutical Chemists, Medical Hall, Simla, January 5, 1880.

DEAR SIR,—We embrace this opportunity of congratulating you upon the wide-spread reputation this justly esteemed medicine, Dr. J. Collis Browne's Chlorodyne, has earned for itself, not only in Hindostan, but all over the East. As a remedy of general utility, we much question whether a better is imported into the country, and we shall be glad to hear of its finding a place in every Anglo-Indian home. We could multiply instances *ad infinitum* of the extraordinary efficacy of Dr. Collis Browne's Chlorodyne in Diarrhoea and Dysentery, Spasms, Cramps, Neuralgia, the Vomiting of Pregnancy, and as a general sedative, that have occurred under our personal observation during many years. In Choleraic Diarrhoea, and even in the more terrible forms of Cholera itself, we have witnessed its surprisingly controlling power. We have never used any other form of this medicine than Collis Browne's, from a firm conviction that it is decidedly the best, and also from a sense of duty we owe to the profession and the public, as we are of opinion that the substitution of any other than Collis Browne's is a deliberate breach of faith on the part of the Chemist to prescriber and patient alike.

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Members of the Pharm. Society of Great Britain, His Excellency the Viceroy's Chemists. deliberately untrue.

Vice-Chancellor Wood stated that Dr. J. COLLIS BROWNE was undoubtedly the Inventor of CHLORODYNE, that the whole story of the Defendant FREEMAN was

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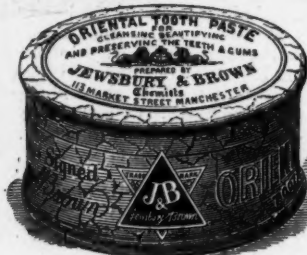
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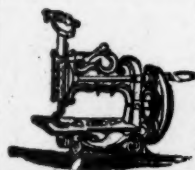
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ARE admitted by thousands to be worth above a Guinea a Box for Bilious and Nervous Disorders, such as Wind and Pain in the Stomach, Sick Headache, Giddiness, Fullness and Swelling after Meals, Dizziness and Drowsiness, Cold Chills, Flushings of Heat, Loss of Appetite, Shortness of Breath, Costiveness, Scurvy, Blotches on the Skin, Disturbed Sleep, Frightful Dreams, and all Nervous and Trembling Sensations, &c. The first dose will give relief in twenty minutes. This is no fiction, for they have done it in thousands of cases. Every sufferer is earnestly invited to try one Box of these Pills, and they will be acknowledged to be

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